The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac

Michael Graeme

The Last Guests

of

La Maison Du Lac

by

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to Hans Victor Gruber

LMDL MMXII

* * * * *

Chapter 1

When a man is first attracted to a woman, it's not really the woman who draws him, more the recognition of something undiscovered within himself. And what I saw in myself when I looked at Gabrielle that first evening made me wonder, because I thought I'd done with all of that a long time ago. Indeed what I saw in her made me doubt I'd discovered even a fraction of the self I thought by then I knew.

It was my first night at La Maison du Lac, a remote Swiss hotel nestled deep in a densely forested valley, in the foothills of the Alps. I was sitting in the dining room, weary and alone, at the wrong end of a long drive. It was a corner table, tucked away by the kitchen doors, the staff presumably testing my stereotypical English aversion towards making a fuss, but they'd misjudged me. In fact I preferred the invisibility of my position because there's nothing worse than being in the middle of such a grand dining room, amid twinkling chandeliers, crisp linen table-cloths and glittering silver-ware, sitting there, doing nothing but advertising your solitude.

Anyway, there she was, centre-stage, hemmed in between a pair of frightful old waxworks - namely her parents, Monsieur and Madame Lafayette. Madame Lafayette was one of those jowly old dames who appear permanently displeased, while her husband had the dry, superior air of an old-school academic. Madame had just noticed something on her dessert spoon and, with one eyebrow arched in disapproval, was tipping the spoon towards her husband for him to inspect and share in her low opinion of the standards they were having to endure. I caught the word, *sale*,.. dirty! He shook his head in dutiful dismay. Personally, I've never known a better presented hotel than La Maison, and since it so clearly failed to measure up to their expectations I was led to suppose that nothing ever would.

Gabrielle had the look of a child that night, and she was so quiet, so undemonstrative in her mannerisms, she went unnoticed between her more animated parents. She was pale, perhaps even a little sickly, dressed in an unflattering blouse, and an unfashionable skirt that would have better suited someone her mother's age. This was in stark contrast to the Italian girls on the neighbouring table who were dressed, shall we say, less modestly but considerably more in vogue. However, like the Italian girls, Gabrielle was hardly a child - she must

have been in her early thirties - yet she appeared shrunken, the full bloom of her womanhood arrested, and she had become instead a flower rendered papery thin and transparent for want of sunshine.

The only hint that all was not lost was her hair, which had the colour and the fertile sheen of a freshly opened chestnut. It would have been voluminous, I thought, except for now it was severely fastened up. Surely if there was any spirit left in Gabrielle, it had fled her body years ago, and resided now exclusively in those lovely chestnut tresses. What a pleasure it would be, I thought, to see her let that hair down, and let the spirit of her flow back into those sickly bones.

Her eyes never left the table - not even when her parents spoke to her, and I noticed Madame had the habit of fussing with Gabrielle's table setting, as if the girl could not be trusted to leave things tidy. I found this deeply irritating, though I don't know why because these people were nothing to me. All the same I wondered how she managed to bear it all so patiently.

After dinner I lingered over my coffee and watched as she left the dining room, noting how she walked with a pronounced stoop, as if for ever wary of low ceilings, that she was embarrassed by her height, afraid to rise up to the proud stature of which she was surely capable. Beneath the rather ill fitting clothes however, and her stilted gait, I'm ashamed to say I joined the dots, so to speak, and reconstructed the outline of an attractive figure, generously curved,... and curiously desirable.

"Lovely isn't she?"

“Hmm?”

A white suited man was standing by my table now. It was all I could do to avoid uttering a startled gasp. This was Herr Gruber - the owner of La Maison, and himself something of an enigma. He spoke quietly so as not to draw attention to my embarrassing voyeurism, and his expression seemed also genuinely appreciative of Gabrielle's looks. I smiled to cover my blushes, and he asked if he could join me. I nodded my assent, and he sat down.

It was said Gruber took little interest in the day to day running of the hotel, entrusting this instead to a team of polished and spotlessly uniformed staff whom he had personally poached from the finest establishments all over Europe. La Maison was his home - a grand

abode of Edwardian brick and white render, a place with a permanently changing social landscape whose comings and goings he regarded with the air of a detached, though not entirely disinterested observer.

He was not a sociable man. Guests described him as polite, though exceedingly reserved. To be singled out by him for small talk was considered a great prize, something to be gossiped about afterwards in tones of hushed astonishment. Anything approaching an actual conversation however was rare. It was not surprising then that envious heads were turned when Gruber actually sat down with me, as if we were old friends.

He was in his sixties, I guessed, healthily tanned, his face only lightly wrinkled, so he might easily have passed for someone much younger. There was an air of relaxed authority about him, also a charming and slightly roguish twinkle I'm sure the ladies found irresistible, but, although it was said he'd enjoyed many a discretely uncomplicated liaison in the past, he remained steadfastly unattached. He was a wealthy man of course; a former industrialist, and an adventurer, now settling back upon his fortune. There were rumours La Maison was not the only hotel he owned, that there were others in France and Spain, though being a native Swiss, La Maison was where he preferred to base himself.

"I do hope you will forgive me, Mr. Graves," he said, "I took the liberty of looking you up in the guest book. You are a frequent visitor to our little oasis, are you not?"

"I am, yes," I replied, surprised by his interest. I'd always felt invisible here, but then the anonymity was something that had always suited me. "It's been an annual pilgrimage for many years," I added.

"And, if I may say, it is a great pleasure to have you with us again."

"Thank you."

There was something reassuring about his company. You might call it a largeness of spirit, as if his presence permeated the place with a sense of calm and order, galvanised it into the haven it was. And we, like travellers lost in a wasteland, flocked from our respective dystopias, from all over the world, to La Maison's reviving springs.

"It is unfortunate of course," he went on, gesturing with his hand towards the door through which the Lafayettes had recently departed.

"Oh?"

"The parents are frightful. They too have been coming here for years - since Gabrielle was a little girl - though I don't know what they see here since they complain all the time about the slightest thing. My poor manager, Monsieur Lagrange, always dreads their arrival and is in a permanent state of despair while they're here."

This was unusual, an hotelier pointing out the shortcomings of his guests to another guest. But Gruber was no ordinary hotelier.

"On the other hand, Mr. Graves, I imagine it would take a lot for *you* to complain about anything. This table, for example; it is kept only for when the dining room is full, or for latecomers, or those without a reservation, yet as you see, the dining room is very quiet this evening. Why do you not complain? Your English politeness, I suppose? It is a simple matter to move yourself from here to there, to the very centre of things, so to speak, and no inconvenience to anyone."

"To be honest, Herr Gruber, I'm perfectly happy where I am. Otherwise, as I'm sure you're well aware, the English can be as rude as any other nationality. And,... I may not be so English as I appear at first glance."

He laughed, and I was able to glimpse something in him; that for all of his mysterious reserve, it was important to him people took pleasure in their time here. But we were talking about the Lafayettes:

He sighed wistfully. "I imagine they must have frightened off many a potential suitor for the poor girl. She's of an age now when she should have some experience in matters of the heart, should she not? It saddens me to think that all she knows will be what her parents might have told her she should be afraid of."

"I see what you mean, yes. And no matter how hopelessly a man was in love with her, her parents would give him pause for thought I should think."

He glanced over to where the Italian table had just erupted into howls of laughter. "Now, the De Lucas on the other hand," he mused, "I

imagine a man would find himself welcomed with open arms, and adopted at once like a long lost son. And the daughters are,... shall we say?...."

"Quite,... a man would be stuck for choice between them."

"Both of them single, *and looking*, if their flirtatiousness is anything to go by, yet I notice they do not draw your eye the same way as Mademoiselle Lafayette? Come,... there's no need to be bashful. We are both men of the world."

“Em,.. I take it we're speaking purely hypothetically here?”

“Of course.”

"Well,.. they're very lovely of course. But,... you see they're not,..."

"Yes?"

"Well,... they don't appear to be in any distress, do they?"

He caught his breath. “Of course," he said, as if he'd just hit upon the very thing. "How dramatic! You would like to *rescue* her?"

"What?... No, no,... you misunderstand. My interest is purely academic. We were speaking hypothetically, remember?"

"Academic?” He pulled a disapproving face. “But my dear Mr. Graves, how dry! How utterly unromantic of you.”

“Well, I'm sorry, but there it is. I don't know Gabrielle. She's a stranger to me, and she could be perfectly happy for all I know. So, if I'm speculating to the contrary then I take it as a sign that it's something inside of *me* that needs rescuing.”

He appeared to be intrigued but I think he knew perfectly well what I was on about. He was simply drawing me out. “Really?” he said.

“It's purely a psychological matter.”

“And,... you have an interest in psychology?”

“As a layman, and a writer, yes. Not as a psychologist, or a psychiatrist

or anything like that. It's an instinct, you see? The man must rescue the damsel in distress. It's a fundamental pattern in the construction of all male psyches. Why is that, do you think?"

He shook his head, bemused. “Because the damsel is in distress,... and it's the gentlemanly thing to do?”

“But we've already established that since I don't know Gabrielle, we cannot possibly say for sure if she needs rescuing or not. No,... Gabrielle is a projection of my soul. My attention is drawn to her because it is my soul that seeks rescue, in a sense,... it seeks recognition, communion,... connection. And it uses Gabrielle merely as a symbol, as an illustration to grab my attention.”

He was quiet for a while as he thought about this. I was tired, and my fatigue had rendered me a little unguarded, or surely I would not have spoken so openly with him, but there was something about Gruber that invited confidence. He was a collector of secrets, and all done with a fatherly manner and a charming smile, because when we looked at him we projected something else of ourselves upon him, something far more dangerous than our wayward souls. He was our wise wizard, the man who knew everything, even magical things, and he could protect us with his wisdom and his knowledge of the mysteries of the universe. Such men make great leaders, but they can also lay waste to continents. They are the master architects, the alchemists, the bringers of great change.

"You mentioned you were a writer,” he went on. “Your biography tells me you write detective fiction?”

"My biography?” I laughed. “I wasn't aware I had one!"

"Oh,... you have a,... how do you say?... a Wikipedia entry.”

“You Googled me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I'm flattered,... I think. It's true I used to write detective fiction – The Inspector Grantley mysteries? You've probably never heard of them. Rather trite stuff I'm afraid, but popular for a while.”

“And you say your interest in psychology somehow informs your

work?"

His knowledge of me suggested he'd done more than casually look me up on Wikipedia and I didn't know if I should be worried about that or not. "I've moved on," I explained, guardedly. "I haven't published detective fiction in years."

"So it would seem. And yet reading the internet forums, the world awaits with baited breath the intrepid Inspector Grantley's next case."

"The publishers keep nagging me to do another one."

"Let me guess: you can't bring yourself to regurgitate the same old formulaic nonsense?"

"Then you *have* read my stories?"

He laughed. "I regret to say I have not. Detective fiction is not really my forte."

"Nor mine. I made the mistake of publishing one short novel, years ago."

"Ah! And as a consequence you became an immediate victim of Inspector Grantley's calculating success?"

"Exactly. I don't begrudge it – not really. God knows I needed the money and there's many a writer would be grateful for it. It's just ironic that the thing I personally felt the least inclined to pursue, I should be most known for."

"But such is life, Mr. Graves. And now?"

"Now?"

"You are still writing, I presume?"

"Oh," I said, guardedly: "I'm not doing much really."

"Come, come; your secrets are safe with me."

"Well,... I'm trying to write a different kind of story now. I suppose you'd call it a psychological mystery. Inspector Grantley's superior powers of

deductive reasoning are no longer suitable for the job. Indeed the laws of reason become something of a hindrance when what you're seeking is to solve the enigma of the meaning of your life."

"Ah, yes,... I would agree with you there. We need to exercise a little more in the way of intuition, even if the facts are telling us we're deluding ourselves."

"Quite."

"We need to summon the muses, the daemons of the inner world to our assistance."

"The daemons, yes, but are they to be trusted, Herr Gruber?"

He gave me a mysterious smile. "And what have your enquires so far revealed, about the meaning of our lives?"

"Only that we're deluding ourselves in thinking there's such a thing as meaning at all. Most likely our lives are going to end mid-sentence, like so many of the stories I've begun; our lives are a scattering of industry, full of hope, expectation and foolish optimism, ultimately to be left off unfinished, without conclusion, or meaning, without all the little loose ends tied up neatly in the closing paragraph."

"You're saying none of your psychological mysteries have resolved themselves?"

"Not to my satisfaction, no. I must have written a million words in search of something meaningful, but found nothing in any of them."

"Why, my dear Mr. Graves, this is a tragedy,...."

He spoke with feeling but I had the impression it wasn't that he felt disappointment at the negative results of my search, rather that his disappointment was in *me*, that he knew I was wrong, that I was merely too blind to see, that indeed I should have known better.

"That's why I'm here," I admitted. "To clear my head, to feast myself on La Maison's ravishing scenery. And hopefully strike up in a new direction. "

He raised an eyebrow suggestively.

“No,...no. I was not referring to Gabrielle.”

I stared at the door through which the Lafayettes had recently departed, trying to conjure up the image of Gabrielle once more, and the strange feelings she'd stirred in me.

“I'm not sure what I'm trying to say, Herr Gruber. Only perhaps that I no longer take part in the petty intrigues of life. I prefer the insides of my own head for company these days. To release a woman like Gabrielle would be a serious undertaking, and a grave responsibility for a man. I am *not* that man. I came here to work, to arrive at a conclusion to whatever it is I am wrestling with inside my head, and definitely not to flirt with shy girls who have no hope of ever growing up."

He looked crestfallen, as if he would have liked nothing better than for Gabrielle to be freed from her parent's repressive shadow – or was that my own perverse psychology again? Was I projecting my own desires onto him? While I was wrestling with this particular conundrum, I saw a resolve take hold in the set of his jaw, and then with slow deliberation, he said: "My dear Mr. Graves, I know she interests you, perhaps in ways you do not understand. Perhaps in Mademoiselle Lafayette, there lies the the story you have yet to begin. I disagree with you that our lives are without meaning. There is always a point - it's just that many of us fail to realise it. I think you know this. I think you're simply afraid you will not realise the meaning of your own life, afraid you will have wasted it searching for something you cannot be sure exists in the first place. But this is part of the human condition. Yes,... she moves something within you. But it is not enough to accept that fact and meditate upon it. You must *act*. Only by knowing her, in the fullest sense of the word, will you ever know what it is that is missing in your self."

“And that's the secret of being human?”

“More specifically, Mr. Graves, it is the secret of being a man.”

I was growing weary of our fencing. I'd set out to ward him off with my arrogantly superior and ridiculously academic viewpoint, only to find that he was getting the better of me.

“I'm not that kind of man, Herr Gruber.”

“And what kind is that?”

“I don't know,... a casual seducer of womankind.”

“Ah, this is true. You are much worse than that,... much more dangerous to a woman, and to yourself.”

“Oh?”

“You are a Romantic, Mr. Graves.”

I smiled. “A hopeless romantic?”

“I did not say *hopeless*. Not entirely. No,... indeed the old ways are coming to an end, I think,... this view of the world as a rational place, a place where men like your Inspector Grantley reign supreme. I think we are realising now that it was the Romantics who had the clearer vision - Blake, Wordsworth, Byron. But theirs was such a complicated and subjective view, and for a long time the rational approach seemed more attractive to the masses because it was easier and less open to interpretation.

“But a world void of romanticism is also a world void of soul. You know this, and so you have abandoned poor old Grantley to his magnifying glass. He obsesses more and more about less and less, while ignoring the greater beauty of the world, and the fact that the true nature of that beauty is largely inexplicable, highly subjective, but also very real and revealed only by its traces,... like those you glimpsed just now,... in Mademoiselle Lafayette. She haunts you, Mr Graves.”

"We're forgetting one thing in all of this," I said, "and that is Gabrielle. There comes a point in the life of any caged animal when escape is no longer possible - whether the door is opened or not. She may be content with her lot. She may be beyond the stage where she can manage on her own. Also I imagine there is nothing more humiliating for a man than to be permanently cuckolded by his in-laws."

"Ah, but equally,” he countered, “we should not forget the hunger for life. Circumstances may force us into adopting a certain submissive frame of mind - but we need only to be shown a way out, and the hunger can be transforming - like a breech in a dam; it can lay waste to whatever lies at its feet."

"All the more reason for a man to be careful then."

He gave a nod, satisfied he had the measure of me. I was alarmed by this; it made me wonder what else he might be thinking, if indeed he might be thinking of engineering a meeting between me and Gabrielle. I wanted to make him promise he would do no such thing, but for now I found I'd had too much of him, that I needed time alone to digest him, to regroup my forces. I was relieved then when he rose, bowed to me in that ridiculously formal manner of his, and bade me good evening. Yes, I found all of this unsettling, but on the upside, I was amply compensated by the fact that I was suddenly treated like royalty by the staff.

Chapter 2

La Maison du Lac, sits upon the shore of a vast lake in a bowl of airy mountains, childishly pointy and snow capped. The area is overwhelmingly picturesque, what the Romantics who first passed this way two centuries ago would have called sublime. There is a dense, surrounding forest that lends a blanket of silence, a sense of the busy world held at bay. The trees, mostly pine and spruce, cover the steep sided hills that otherwise enclose the lake, and sweep down to its shore, leaving only the occasional clearing where one might stand by the water's edge. Beyond them, rising to a few thousand meters or more, there are alpine pastures of lush green and gold, and beyond them, the mountains - stern, grey edifices to which there cling the last vestiges of the pines - before these too give way to yet more barren, snow-clad peaks, which ascend into the blue distance.

The nearest town is twenty kilometres away and there are no other hotels or dwellings on the lake at all. It is not a resort, you understand, more of a retreat, and most guests do not venture far beyond the grounds, there being no need with such a wealth of splendid facilities to entertain them: glorious indoor and outdoor swimming pools, tennis courts, croquet, rambling gardens bursting with perfume and colour, and all overseen by an attentive and remarkably serene staff, seemingly eager to indulge our every whim. In short La Maison is a haven, curiously Victorian in its manners, set down in the midst of an astonishingly beautiful wilderness, and well worth the thousand miles of road between it and my much less palatial abode in England.

As I'd explained to Gruber, it was a pilgrimage I'd been making annually for many years now. I thought it curious that I'd never encountered Gabrielle before - since she'd apparently also been such a regular visitor in the summer months. But such is fate, I suppose - not that this made any difference to me because I swear I was not interested in her in any way. It was enough I understood my attraction in psychological terms, and no matter how dry Gruber had thought them, such insights had spared me many a useless liaison in the past.

After dinner that first night, I retired to my room, my head spinning with the last five hundred miles of the journey, and with the remembered snatches of that singular conversation rearing up at me, so that as I lay upon the bed, weary as I was, I was unable to sleep. Already our

discussion had taken on a dream-like air, and I wondered if I was remembering it correctly. Had I really said those things? Had he really asked me those questions? It was as if the man himself had been a stage-hypnotist and had drawn those words out of me, against my better judgement. The most disturbing thing though was that I recognised how all of it was true. It was as if he'd been observing me for the whole of my life, finally to sit down for five minutes and casually point out to me with a mixture of allegory and allusion, the parlous state of my life, my work, and my psyche.

In short, I had stalled. I'd reached, it seemed, that middle aged, existential impasse, and had been gazing with peculiar longing and frustration at a girl who was perhaps a little too young for me to be thinking of her in any way at all. And I did not want a woman. Women complicated things, and in my experience they were never what they seemed, mainly because I was incapable of seeing them as they were. I insisted on wrapping them up in all that mythological, romantic nonsense. And it was always the way that eventually, the psychological veil of my projections would be lifted and I'd be faced with the company of yet another human being as needy and annoying as the rest.

All right, this sounds self indulgent and probably a little pompous as well, but that's it with us writers; when you've been in the wilderness for a while, there's only your self belief that keeps you going. And sometimes that self belief can be misplaced. It takes a serious turn of events to change things for the better, and even then, you have to want it first.

The morning after that conversation with Gruber, I was sitting in the garden, taking pleasure in the cool air coming down from the mountains, when I heard Madame Lafayette's imperious tones from the terrace above. She was looking for a table, and I had a feeling the one she wanted was the one I was sitting at. It was a good spot, sunny, sheltered, with excellent views over the lake which, that morning was rendered in an impossible shade of blue. There was another table close by, but to have taken it would have required a degree of social intercourse, and the Lafayettes were very choosy with their company.

Monsieur Lafayette came down to inspect the situation and saw me comfortable with coffee, a day's worth of newspapers, and of course my laptop, on which I was accustomed to working, hacking out my half formed stories, these infuriating false starts, these psychological, self

analytical ramblings. He retreated to make his report and I caught the words *petit, seul* and *Anglais*. He found the presence of the lone little Englishman inconvenient then, and I fancied from his tone he did not think very much of me either, though I'd done nothing I was aware of to offend him. I laughed at the irony: if any man were to gain the approval of her parents and access to Gabrielle, it would not be an Englishman. This was something else I could tell Gruber when I saw him, because I had woken that morning with the uneasy feeling he might yet intend playing a misguided Cupid between us.

After a tour of the garden, they returned, hoping perhaps I would have moved on. But I'm never far from my work, and when I'm working, minutes dissolve into hours, and hours into days as I contemplate my infuriating muse. Had it not been for Bernadette, a particularly attentive and lovely young German girl on Gruber's staff, I would have forgotten meal times, and instead marked the passing of my days only by the hours of light and dark.

Finding me still there, the Lafayettes moved in for the kill, perched themselves on the neighbouring table and pretended to to admire the view. They did not speak but intended, perhaps by the stiffness of their postures, to make me feel uncomfortable. Instead, they succeeded only in making themselves look ridiculous. Once upon a time I would have become terribly self-conscious under such obviously repulsive vibes. Nowadays though, I am infinitely more self-possessed and generally unconcerned by the presence, the wants, or indeed the feelings of others. I have, as the French would put it, a certain s*ang froid*, a cold blood. I am polite, even when dealing with the most odious of characters, and I enjoy playing up to my racial stereotype, but I had also spent a lifetime under the impression others were entrely insensitive to my feelings, and now as I navigated my fourth decade, I found I had developed a thicker skin when it came to disregarding theirs.

Gabrielle was wearing ill fitting chorded trousers, and a sweater - both unfashionable and unflattering, something of the thrift shop about them, though I noted her parents were immaculately turned out in a sort of countrified chic comprising tweed jackets and shiny shoes. I could not decide if Gabrielle dressed down as a mark of rebellion, or if they turned her out that way so as not to outshine them.

I presented them with a polite face and bade them good morning, but they turned away, embarrassed, eyes widened in surprise, as if I had volubly farted. Only Gabrielle replied. Her eyes flickered at the sound

of my greeting and she looked up, blinking out of her bored reverie, as if my voice had woken her and she answered in English. "Good morning, Monsieur Graves."

It was not the voice of a child, though why this should have surprised me I don't know because she was a mature woman after all; I'd merely thought her – I don't know - impaired, I suppose, perhaps possessing the mental age of a pre-pubescent teen, someone incapable of relating to others in an adult way. I knew at once I was mistaken. Her voice was richly toned, low, sonorous. There seemed to be such *life* in it, such *energy* that she had only to find the courage to speak and surely the whole world would stop to listen! And she also seemed to know my name. How could that be? Had the mischievous old Gruber already spoken to her?

Madame Lafayette was quick to flash a warning at her daughter, as if she'd broken a code of propriety in speaking to strangers, especially English ones. Gabrielle dutifully lowered her eyes to the ground. I looked at her for a while, quite mesmerised, so that in the end I attracted Monsieur Lafayette's steely censure.

Dazed, I gave a faint nod by way of apology and returned to my books, but my concentration was broken now. I could still hear her voice, and I marvelled at it, but it was useless; her presence reminded me only that I was lonely, but I did not want her, nor less the complication of what simply *knowing* her might do to my life. And anyway I had far more important business to attend to.

The soul is feminine. If you don't believe there's such a thing as the soul you'll have difficulty accepting anything else I am about to tell you. How happy a man is in life, how genuinely mature and content, is revealed by analysis of his dreams, and in particular dreams of his relations with the women he encounters. This is how his soul speaks to him. These are the murmurs of their wordless conversations, the fireside chats between a man's conscious spirit and his unconscious soul.

Immature women, imprisoned women, imperilled women are indications that all is not well, that his relationship with his soul is immature, stagnant, unhealthy, that she is unhappy and seeks redress. And if she is unhappy, then so is he, though he may delude himself all is well. These are old lessons, first taught to us by that master mariner of the ocean of our dreams, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, a man who had lived and died not far from where the waves lapped upon La

Maison's shore. He might even have known this place, I thought.

If a man goes on ignoring his dreams, his soul becomes more strident in her complaints, leaping out of his head and reflecting her presence in reality itself,... so a man, bone weary after a long journey, looks up and stares across a crowded dining room, sees a woman he does not know, and his mischievous soul has him fall in love with her. Then he's caught, punished, because he would not listen.

Immature, imprisoned, imperilled. Three keywords, and Gabrielle reflected back each one. Regardless of her true nature, this was how I saw her, so you can imagine my disappointment: I thought I'd been doing well, straightening out my psyche over the decades! Had I truly been so deluded? Well, of course I had! I'd written nothing worthwhile in years.

It was all right Gruber telling me the world was changing, becoming less trite, less rational in its outlook, that the time was right for some sort of Romantic Renaissance, a thing that would have had Wordsworth and Blake and Byron, tossing their caps with joy, and shouting *we told you so!* But in my experience the world was far less enamoured of the Romantic viewpoint, and Gruber had no room to talk; La Maison provided the oasis from which we could contemplate such things, but even to sip tea from its lakeside terraces, cost the passing Romantic a fortune – so he could not afford to do it very often.

The world was what it had always been, a system of financial, rather than emotional transactions between those who had something to sell, and those who could afford to buy. The world was not concerned with the psychological tantrums of middle aged hacks like me. After all, my publishers did not enquire after the progress of my existential meanderings, if they enquired at all these days, but only to cajole me into resurrecting the dusty old Inspector Grantley, because for all of his shallowness at least he'd the potential to turn a few bucks.

Readers emailed me constantly, wanting to know when he would be tackling that next case, even though it was a decade since I'd penned the last one! How could I tell them the mystery I now sought to solve was beyond Grantley, probably insoluble, but that I was bound to my course. It would probably result in my financial impoverishment, but equally I felt that not to pursue it would result in my emotional ruin, and the latter, to a man of middle years, is far more important.

Chapter 3

That evening there was an air of excitement in the dining room. An Icelandic volcano, the Eyjafjallajokull, had erupted and was ejecting unimaginable quantities dust into the atmosphere. The weather systems had begun to spread this dust over the whole of Northern Europe. All commercial airliners were to be grounded from midnight as a precaution, in case the abrasive dust damaged to their engines. It was an unprecedented event, and no one seemed to know how to deal with it. The airports were already clogged with stranded travellers, and since the jet aeroplane was used for even modest voyages in those days, many of the guests at La Maison were now wondering if they'd be able to get home.

The Lafayettes discussed the situation over their entrée, their heads inclined towards each other, their eyes hardened, as if faced with the end of the world. Should they cancel their stay and drive to the airport that evening in order to fight for what aeroplane seats remained - for surely things could only get worse? Or should they gambol that it would all be cleared up by the end of the week, and the world back to normal? Gabrielle took no part in this of course, appearing instead bored and detached as she sat between them, her eyes downcast as she toyed with a spoon, that her mother eventually took from her and laid to rest upon the table.

Bernadette, who had come to enquire after my order, asked me if I'd heard the news about the volcano. I replied that I had and, in a voice raised a little louder than was necessary, I added that the last time this volcano had erupted there had been no summer that year across the whole of Europe. For myself I explained to her I was unconcerned, having driven from England, and that I was glad not be flying because such eruptions could go on for months, even years, that geological processes were of a different order entirely to human timetables.

It was a cruel of me; the Lafayettes spoke English well enough, though never in my presence, and I knew they were eavesdropping. I meant to be rid of them, and I like to think my words tipped the balance because, after dinner, they were packed and a taxi was waiting to take them to the airport. If there was a flight out of the country, they would be on it, no matter how many necks they had to stand on in the process.

I'm sorry for this: I had taken against them to a degree that was not rational - and this was just one more thing that told me I was out of balance within myself, for really I should have taken no notice of them whatsoever. Yet they appeared grotesque to me, insulting,... irritating to the point of blind fury, so that I felt quite giddy whenever I was near them. What part of me it was that these emotions were pointing to, the part of me so badly in need of repair, I could not guess, and alas I found myself reluctant to waste any time in exploring. Sure, it was easy to contemplate the possible divine loveliness of one's soul reflected in their daughter, but of them, I wanted no reminder whatsoever, for they were truly, abominably ugly.

I encountered them again in the lobby. They'd obviously made up their minds to leave by now but Monsieur Lagrange, the manager, was gamely urging them to stay. He'd heard the airports were already closed, that their journey would be wasted, but Madame insinuated that his only interest was in delaying them so they might be stranded indefinitely at his hotel, paying his inflated prices. Monsieur Lagrange was clearly hurt, though he was able to control his indignation when he realised he would be rid of them soon enough if only he could dampen his professional concerns and keep his mouth shut.

Gabrielle was standing a little to one side, detached as usual and slightly stooped, her eyes, for want of some other distraction, fixed absently upon their pile of matching luggage. She'd thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her coat, and as she drew one of them out, the clasp of her bracelet came undone. It fell, bounced from the tiled floor, then rolled a little and came to rest by my foot, as I was passing. I picked it up and held it out to her. She recovered it without looking at me, though she nodded her gratitude.

"*Merci, Monsieur. Thank you. "*

"*Je vous en pris*, *Mademoiselle. You are welcome. Em,.. Bon voyage*." And then, unable to find the words in French, I added in English, rather clumsily as if it were my second language: "Stay,.. safe."

I don't know why I said this. It was guilt I suppose. It was not her fault my unconscious, *my soul*, had fastened upon her for purposes better known to its own mysterious self. She was innocent - and as Gruber had said, really quite lovely. I suppose I'd simply felt it was safe to indulge my sympathies now, because she was going, and I would never see her again.

She looked at me, reading something of my confusion, a thing I'd not meant to betray. Then she blushed, suddenly sensitive to it, and her pupils dilated alarmingly into an entirely unexpected hungry blackness, but by then Madam Lafayette was taking her by the elbow and steering her out to the waiting taxi. Gabrielle looked back at me, startled. Good God, I thought,... she would have been up for it!

I'd had a near miss, I told myself, partly in self-congratulations, but as I watched the taxi depart, I felt a growing emptiness, or rather it was a growing awareness of an emptiness that I'd been living with for years. Could it be she was more important to me than my ego had allowed me to see? It was too late for such thoughts now, of course. Sure, it seemed ours was just another story ending mid-sentence, untidily, with no explanation, and no meaning whatsoever.

Chapter 4

It was by the lake that same evening I encountered Gruber again. The dining room had been uncomfortably warm, and now I sought the coolness of the gardens. There was a sharpness to the air here, something of the snowy tops, and I found it refreshing. He was sitting with a glass of brandy, enjoying a cigar. He offered one to me and though I did not smoke, I sat in the wicker chair beside him and accepted it. I was still shaken by the departure of Gabrielle, I suppose, but the cigar also had such a delicious aroma, I wanted to bathe myself in it, though I'd always supposed that to actually smoke one of these things was like sucking on pure poison. Anton, the head waiter, materialised with a match, and was then politely dispatched to bring me a glass.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't know why I accepted this. I don't actually smoke - I'm not even sure I know how."

"Oh,... just puff on it," he said "You'll soon get the hang. Go ahead: a little of what is bad for us is sometimes a good thing. Perhaps you need it, even though you tell yourself you do not want it."

I understood we were not just talking about the cigar now.

"The Lafayettes have gone," I told him, thinking to dissuade him from launching into another long lecture, the point of which was to persuade me that Gabrielle was the answer to my dreams, to my ruined life, my wilderness years and my wasted heart.

"Yes," he said. "Foolish really. Monsieur Lagrange did his honourable best to dissuade them, though I know he was as delighted at the prospect of their going as you seem to be. However, it's a long drive to the airport, and of course it will be closed before they arrive. I suspect you'll find them at breakfast just the same."

"I don't think so. As you said it's a long way. Surely they'll find accommodation in Zurich if needs be."

He shrugged. "They'll have no choice. It's an extraordinary situation. Imagine it:" he gestured to the sky, making an arc with his cigar and showering sparks into the darkness. "The whole of the Northern

Hemisphere, and not an aeroplane in the sky! Can you imagine the last time that happened? Surely it takes us back to the age before Bleriot, before two world wars and the whole crashing calamity of the twentieth century.

“Can you imagine the chaos of stranded travellers, Mr. Graves? I dare say the only rooms available anywhere in the whole of Switzerland will be the ones the Lafayettes have just vacated, and Madame does not look the type who would be content to sleep in an airport lounge." He smiled. "Though of course I understand why you would not want them to come back. But this is nonsense. I have been thinking about it, and have come to the conclusion that Mademoiselle Lafayette is *exactly* the sort of woman you need."

"You don't know me, Herr Gruber. I read my Wikipedia entry this morning, and it tells you very little. Indeed it tells you nothing. I barely recognised myself from it. Why,... even to describe me as English is an oversimplification – we are never what we seem. "

"That may be so, my friend, but equally sometimes, things are very clear, and the way you looked at her last night spoke volumes. She is in distress and you *must* rescue her. You said so yourself."

"I was speaking metaphorically,.. psychologically,... symbolically. There's nothing simple about that. Her predicament is regrettable of course, but it is nothing to do with me."

"But have you not already made it your business by allowing your emotions to become so aroused? And it is not enough to merely recognise the need in yourself, as you described with the detached air of the intellectual. You must *act*, Mr. Graves.”

“Yes, I do need to act,... but not *literally*, and certainly not with Gabrielle."

"But you know it can be with no other. Perhaps it is what you came here for, even though you did not know it."

"Her parents hate me. They hate me more than any other would-be suitor,... they are,... *Anglophobes*."

He laughed agreeably. "Ah,.. now you clutch at straws. The parents, yes, they are difficult. But it is not the parents you must court. I suspect

you need only hold out your hand to Mademoiselle Lafayette, and she will take it. There are many kinds of courage, Mr. Graves. Having faith in yourself is one of them."

"All right, let me frank with you: I don't want a woman in my life. They're too distracting. and I've not found one yet who understood me. Women are merely human – only a man's soul is truly, divinely, feminine, and only a foolish man would seek to find his soul in a mortal woman. Gabrielle would be no exception. In my mind she is an archetype, a daemon, a fantasy, a sprite, a soul image, as Jung would have said, but in reality she is just a woman - a human being, like any other; flawed, shallow, vain, unappreciative, vindictive and nagging,... and fortunately she is also gone."

My tirade took him aback. "Dear me! I'd say you have a lot to learn about women - either that or you've been most unfortunate in your choices up to now."

I gave him a look that was intended to indicate I wished to speak of other things, but he persisted, gravely now: "Herr Jung, with whom you seem to have a particular affinity, would also have told you that when the archetypes within us break through into reality, we had better listen, for then I suspect reality itself is on the verge of something extraordinary."

“Actually, I was thinking something else,...”

“Oh?”

“Not reality,... but one's inner life. The extraordinary is possible of course, but more usually it is a personal catastrophe we are facing.”

“Yes,... however, have you not observed how much one's inner life is reflected in reality, in the things going on around us? If we are irritable and out of sorts, then the world obliges and finds other things for us to get upset about. If we are fearful, it provides us with the reasons – one after the other.”

“If that is so, Herr Gruber, then God help us all.”

“But why wait for God to help us? Why do we not help ourselves? And if we are granted the means of doing so, then surely, this is God's will anyway. If we wish for a serene life, then we must first think serene

thoughts, and if it is the extraordinary we seek, then we must not be afraid to think extraordinary things."

He rose, brushed the ash from his trousers and bade me good evening. I was left alone to think upon what he'd said, disturbed to the point of trembling by the emotions he'd aroused in me, but there was to be no solution; these things came from unknown depths. We weathered them as best we could, and they either dove us mad, or they went away on their own. There was nothing I could do.

I went to bed in despair. and in the morning, at breakfast, exactly as Gruber had predicted, Gabrielle was seated once more, between her parents.

Chapter 5

They looked dishevelled, as if they'd driven through the night for no reason, which is exactly what they'd done of course. Strangely, Gabrielle looked more rested. I suppose she must have taken the opportunity to doze during the long journey, content to let her parents do battle with the imaginary foes they felt were perpetually assailing them. There was a lesson in their looks, I thought. Gruber had been right: if you felt the world was a constant struggle for supremacy, then life would provide the experiences to confirm it, but it was a self-defeating path, for surely life would eventually drain you, suck the energy from your bones and leave you dried up and brittle. But neither could it be right to be like me - so passive - for then universe would withdraw anything that stood even the remotest chance of ever touching you.

Gabrielle had had no time to fasten up her hair, and it fell about her shoulders now in liquid waves. This transformation alone was arresting and it completely obliterated the demure clothing she was dressed in, so that she eclipsed entirely to my mind the dozy, late night, baggy eyed expressions of the De Luca girls on the neighbouring table.

She looked at me, saw me looking, then snatched her gaze back as if she'd been scalded. I was reminded of the hungry look she'd given me the night before and I wanted to tell her she was mistaken, that my own look, just now, had not meant what I feared she was thinking it meant. But of course men are not the only ones who project their mysterious desires out into the world. Gabrielle did not know me, and I could not imagine what strange fantasies she had woven around me, nor what need in her my image addressed, but in that moment, it was confirmed, the thing I'd suspected last night: Gabrielle *wanted* me. I had only to hold out my hand, and she would take it.

I'm sorry of this sounds conceited, but really, I was experienced enough to know these things, and cool minded enough to understand it was not really me she saw at all. Still, I was in no doubt about the matter, and this made me all the more determined to avoid her. If I wanted a woman it would be for the delusion of an uncomplicated liaison and nothing more – one of the De Luca girls perhaps? Carmen looked particularly lascivious at times, and might be up for a bit of simplistic pleasuring. But Gabrielle? Even bidding her good morning was fraught with complication. She was the sort of woman whose

knowing could profoundly change a man, even to the point of destruction. That is what I resisted so vehemently. We none of us like the idea of change, even if it might presage the one transcendent revelation we have sought all our lives.

I made for the garden, thinking to refresh myself once more with the mountain air, only to be struck by the unusual light. A rose tint is common enough in the Alps at even-tide, but this was morning, when the light is more often yellow. And there was a haze obscuring the mountains, so they seemed less substantial. Was this the dust from that ever so distant Icelandic volcano? The feel of the air was different too. Gone was the dry freshness of the alpine regions and instead it had a moistness to it, and a thickness more akin to the humidity of the tropics. The snow-line had receded overnight and the lake was already several feet higher.

Lagrange was on the terrace, gazing out at the scene. When I came up to him, he ran his finger around his collar to loosen it. "It's very strange," he said.

There was a quietness too, as if before a storm. "Will it thunder, do you think?" I asked him.

"No. It is the volcano, perhaps? Something with the dust? Can you taste it? I think I can taste something." He licked his lips. “Metallic?” He shrugged, then added quietly, as if embarrassed. "Have you the time, Monsieur? My watch has stopped."

I drew out my antiquated pocket watch and flipped the case. His eyes lit up. "Ah,... a fine watch Monsieur."

"Thank you. It's rather an old one, but still reliable."

"Yes,... yes,... Herr Gruber, he carries one just like it. Ah, but these old time-pieces, they have such *je ne sais cois*,... such character, *oui? "*

"Yes, I agree. By the way, I think the clock over your desk has stopped too."

"I know. It looks like it will be - how do you say - one of those days. Have you plans Monsieur?"

"A walk perhaps. The air might be more pleasant higher up."

"Yes,.. a good idea."

He gave me a map of the forest trails, and directed me to a grassy peak, some miles distant that overlooked the lake, suggesting it might be a good objective for the day. And if all else failed he said, he indicated a spot on the lake that was perfect for a bit of private bathing.

I thanked him and set out, following the winding paths that led from the hotel gardens, then along the edge of the lake. At a short distance from the hotel, the shoreline was interrupted by a low rocky outcrop which jutted into the water and, sitting divinely atop the outcrop, there rose a classical pavilion. It was circular in layout, built of stone, with tall columns supporting a domed copper clad roof, now stained green with an eerie, luminous verdigris, and all of it perfectly reflected in the still waters. I remembered it from earlier visits to the hotel, but took delight in its appearance now like renewing an old acquaintance.

It was a quiet retreat, somewhere for lovers, I thought. In my own country it would have been fouled, graffitied and full of broken bottles, so immature is our romantic sense. But here, its terracotta paintwork was immaculate, its openings adorned with drapes that hung lazily in the airless morning. Inside I discovered cushions, and embroidered throws, and there I sat a while, contemplating the lake, but the continuing silence and the unfrequented beauty of the pavilion made me feel only more keenly my solitude. It made me long for something I could not define, something I therefore supposed I would never know.

What was I thinking of? That uncomplicated liaison with Carmen De Luca perhaps, or her equally lovely sister? Is that what my soul most desired? Of course not! My soul wanted *Gabrielle*. It wanted complication, involvement,... it wanted participation in reality, for pity's sake! But it could damned well choose another image for its reflection, one that was not guarded by a pair of poisonous, leathery and ever present gnomes!

During the course of the morning, I climbed into the alpine pastures and was dripping with sweat long before I reached them. There was still no movement in the air, nor was the visibility any better for the altitude, though I had by then climbed almost a thousand metres. There were cattle here, the ubiquitous, dun-coloured alpine cows with their bells, which on previous visits to this region had clanged and banged in gay abandon, lending a cheery air to even the remotest corners – now though the cattle seemed weighed down by the heat, crouching, every last one, in the grass, their silence somehow

unnatural.

I made for the grassy peak as Lagrange had suggested, but even there the air hung lifelessly, nor did the summit provide much by way of revelation. I was still far short of the bare, grey, snow-capped heights of the mountains, which now seemed impossibly remote, and accessible only along forbidding ridges of shattered rock, or scree strewn slopes. Nor could I see the hotel, and from this altitude, and in this light, the lake had taken on an unhealthy, tar-like appearance. I was aware also of the deepening quiet, and grew more fearful of being caught in the open if there should be a thunderstorm.

Unable to rid myself of a growing unease, I retraced my steps, dizzy with heat, aching for the civilised comfort of tea and a cool shower. It was only hours later, with aching legs and trembling knees, when I caught sight of the lake close at hand once more, glinting through the pine scented forest, and I realised I was within easy reach of the sanctuary of La Maison again did I feel able to relax, to slacken my pace.

What was wrong with me? I was twitching at shadows. It was as if I expected something to happen, as if I could feel it coming,... something bad.

I was still a mile or so away from the hotel, following a path by the lake shore, when I came across an inviting bay. It was the spot Lagrange had recommended for swimming, and it was easy to see why. The water looked so clear and cool, and I was so hot - the sweat stinging my eyes - that I came down to the water's edge greedily to splash my face. It felt so good, so silken and reviving the next thing I knew I was stripping naked and sliding into the inviting shallows. It was heavenly, and at last, for the first time since my arrival at La Maison, I relaxed.

I swam there for a while, then rose, cool and refreshed, to sit upon a secluded rock, screened by trees and reeds, in order to let myself dry naturally in the air and under the kiss of the sun.

Then I saw Gabrielle.

There was no immediate cause for alarm; I was well concealed. Also, I supposed her parents would be nearby, and they would call her back, as they might an infant, if she wandered too far from the path, so I needed only to bide my time and she'd be gone. Better they did not see me like *this* of course. That would have been a little embarrassing,

and rather more *Française* than one might expect for your average Englishman! I was confident of my invisibility, however, so I did not hasten to dress. Anyway, I was still wet from my swim and it would have been uncomfortable, so I took a deep breath and waited it out.

She came down to the water's edge. She wore a white sun-frock and sandals. What struck me about her was how well she moved now, with a proud roll of her hips, and that she'd raised herself up to her full height, unashamed of it. Could this be the same person?

She reached out and dipped her wrists into the water, then splashed her brow daintily,... then slipped off her sandals and waded out a little way in order to cool her ankles. The further she waded, the greater was the danger she would see me, so I took the precaution of drawing my discarded trousers across my loins. The movement gave me away at once. I could tell by the sideways flicker of her eyes, but, though I'm sure she knew she was being watched now, she pretended not to see. Instead, she looked studiously away as she waded deeper, lifting her dress a little, so she could venture in up to her knees. And then, after a moment, as if gathering the courage, she turned to me, her eyes filled with a puzzling intensity. It was not fear, nor disapproval at my state of nature. It was more the look I imagine on someone's face when they are trying to convince themselves to take a leap into an abyss.

I gave her an embarrassed smile. "Forgive me, Mademoiselle," I said. "I,... I was swimming. I did not think there would be anyone else around."

She regarded the water, then raised a defiant eyebrow, lifted her dress over her head, and tossed it ashore. She wore nothing underneath, and the shock of this filled me with an unexpectedly potent desire. I'd not felt such a thing in years – indeed I doubt I'd ever felt anything quite like it at all. Perhaps it was not Gabrielle I saw but merely a naked woman, a sexual object, beautiful though that object was. What shocked me though was that there was also a darkness to my feelings. Her skin was porcelain-pale, her body tightly muscled, the hair at her crotch copious and arousing to an alarming degree, and every fibre of my being seemed to demand I took possession of her, that I sated myself in an uncomplicated way, by way of her vessel, her sex,...

Forgive me!

I breathed out sharply, trying to expel the baseness of these thoughts. Dear God! What was I supposed to do? This was abominable! How

could I even think such a thing? This woman was deserving of my sympathy, my highest, my noblest feelings – and here I was, wanting nothing more than to simply,... simply,... fuck her!

Truly, I'm sorry. I felt ashamed.

I could not explain it.

She turned away, waded a little further out, then lowered herself into the water and began to swim. My heart pounding, I gathered my clothes and dressed quickly, pulling on my trousers and my shirt. The sooner I got out of there the better! She stopped swimming then, stood up in the shallows and watched me, rivulets streaming down her chest, her breasts dripping and heaving, her lips parted, her jaw tense, as if she wanted to speak but could not, or dared not, for fear of what she might say.

I forced a polite smile, and bowed my head a little in order to take my leave of her. But she was not ready to let me go.

"Sir?..."

"Mademoiselle?"

"*Si vous plais? Attendez!* Please,... wait."

"*Qu'est ce que c'est?* What is it?"

"*Pouvais vous m'aidez?* Will you help me?"

There. It was out!

"But,... I can do nothing,... I wish you well, but I must be going now. Good afternoon."

I'd turned and taken a few hasty steps in retreat, narrowly avoiding tripping, clown like, over my untied shoelaces, when she called out: "*Si vous plais? Ma robe?*"

"What?"

"Will you toss it to me? My dress,... please!"

"Oh,... of course."

I gathered the dress into a neat little ball. It felt warm, electrified, so that my fingers tingled as I held it. Then I tossed it to her, and as she caught it, she turned away, so I wouldn't see her. She'd revealed herself deliberately, and I'd rejected her. It would take a lot for her to reveal herself to me this way again, which was fine because I doubted I could handle it and would have to spend the rest of the week avoiding the possibility. She stepped out of the water, holding her dress over her front, her arms across her breasts and her hips, her eyes downcast. I felt her shrinking, her posture sinking, and I was sorry I might have hurt her feelings.

"Can I,... walk you back to the hotel?" I asked, thinking to soften my rejection.

She replied with a brief shake of the head. Then she looked aside. Thus, demurely, I was dismissed. She'd taken a chance on me, and I'd let her down. If there'd been other men in her life, I wagered every one had at some point done the same thing. I felt wretched and worthless, then hung my head and walked away.

Chapter 6

On returning to the hotel, the incident with Gabrielle was temporarily forgotten when I came upon Signor De Luca standing in the entrance, shaking his watch. I could see it was a quality timepiece, gold, ostentatiously jewelled, with an expensive leather strap.

"It's stopped," he said, in American accented English. "I paid four thousand Euros for it a week ago. And it's stopped, like,... like a piece of crap."

Then Carmen, was at his elbow smiling up at me and rolling her eyes mockingly at his tone. "It's not just *his* watch, Signor Graves, it's everybody's. They have all stopped. Really papa, you take everything so personally."

Curious, I checked the pocket-watch. "Mine seems okay," I said.

He was puzzled for a moment, then it came to him. "But yours is a mechanical watch, Signor Graves!" he said, then stalked off, calling for Lagrange. “It is only electronics that are affected!” he said.

It was true, every battery-operated watch at the hotel had failed, every clock too. Then we realised it was more serious, that indeed anything with a computer chip in it had stopped working. We found Lagrange behind the reception desk, staring in exasperation at his malfunctioning computer. He was red faced, the diminutive figure of Madame Lafayette, uncomprehending, still demanding of him the latest news from the airports.

"I am sorry Madame. It is broken," he said.

I overheard other guests in the lounge murmuring that their televisions no longer worked, nor their radios, but worse than this, their mobile 'phones were also useless. I checked mine, and it too was dead. Then, with a sinking feeling, I dashed up to my room and checked the laptop.

It wouldn't even switch on!

I need to explain something at this point. It was a peculiarity of my working habits that I kept none of my working files on the computer

itself - for fear of malfunctions, like this one. Instead, I kept them on a memory stick - my thoughts, my notes, my stories,... *everything* – which by now amounted to millions of words. But memory sticks too contain computer chips, and for all I knew, it had been fried, along with everything else! Without my computer I could not check this of course, but I assumed the worst, and I was devastated.

Can you possibly understand? I am a *writer*. My words are my reason for being. I hoard them. Over the decades I sift and refine them. I rearrange them, like sequences in a code, trying to unlock the secrets of the ages, trying to understand my past and see my way into the future. But now everything I was familiar with, all my old stories, my old beginnings, so to speak, were simply gone. I felt empty, useless; I was suddenly a man without a purpose, a man without a past. I'd been, to all intents and purposes,...

Erased.

By the time I returned downstairs, Anton, the head waiter was in the process of setting up a mantel clock, 1920's vintage, which he wound to life with a big key. Gruber stood by and provided the time from his own pocket watch. He saw me and smiled. "Ah,... Mr Graves. What time do you have?"

I wasn't much concerned with the time at that moment, but drew the watch from my pocket anyway. We compared times, found we were a few minutes apart, so Anton split the difference, and this became the new temporal reference for La Maison. Both Gruber and I reset our watches to it.

"News is a problem though," said Anton. "The guests are anxious for information."

Gruber thought for a moment. "There's an old valve radio in the basement," he said. "It might still work - always supposing there are any stations still broadcasting on the medium and short waves. Local and national radio are all digital these days. And the mountains will shield us from the weaker foreign signals. Still,... there may be something. Go and fetch it will you, Anton - there's a good man."

Anton dashed off and Gruber placed a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right Mr. Graves? You look as if something terrible has happened. All of this is very curious of course, but surely no cause for alarm, old chap?

"I can't live without my computer," I blurted, and even as I said it I realised how sad and stupid it sounded. "Everything I am is on it. The thought that I may have lost my work,... it's,..."

His brow was now furrowed with a genuine concern. "My dear fellow,... of course! I quite understand,..."

“It's unthinkable,....”

He took this in for a moment, and then offered, rather inexplicably: “Well,... perhaps these things are not that important to you after all?"

"What? How can you say that?"

He was only trying to comfort me, and had plucked an explanation from thin air, which, if not entirely convincing to me sounded at least sincere: "Well,...” he went on, in the same mysterious vein, “if they were really that important they would surely not have been taken from you."

"This is no time for,... philosophy! Didn't you hear me?They're gone!"

He grew more serious, and I detected a stern edge to him now that sobered me: "Come now, Mr. Graves. You must pull yourself together. This is an extraordinary situation. People are unsettled by it. I need you to be calm and rational, to set an example. Where is your stiff upper lip? We have need of it. I thought you English were to be relied upon in a crisis, that it was us mere Continentals who ran about like chickens with no heads!" He drew me to one side, away from the other guests, his jaw tense,... deep in thought. "Seriously,... we must think. What could cause such a thing?"

To be honest I didn't care what had caused it, but he was right, I need to get a grip. "I,.. I don't know,” I said. “A solar flare can effect the mains power - cause a surge which blows the transformers - but you still have power?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard of a solar flare burning out microcircuits. It normally takes a massive pulse of electromagnetic energy."

"And it would take a weapon of some sort to create an effect of such

magnitude. We used to fear the possibility of it decades ago, during the Cold War, did we not?"

"But those days are gone, Herr Gruber. Who would possess and deploy such a weapon over Europe these days?"

"Exactly - it's very strange! Still,... we must make do. I'm fortunate I did not install electronic locks on all the doors, like the tourist board suggested last year, or we would be camping on the lawns."

I had a sudden thought: "If the phenomenon has effected *all* electronic devices, then none of the cars will run either."

"A good point," he said. "Except mine – mine is rather old. It should still run. And so should yours, I think?"

"Then we are fortunate," I replied, sourly, as I thought of my defunct laptop and a million words of text, now effectively deleted from my memory-stick. How fortunate was that? "But, Herr Gruber, this cannot be a local phenomenon. Such a pulse of energy, it's indiscriminate. If it's happened here, it's happened elsewhere."

"Yes, I suppose it must."

"Would you like me to drive into town? There may be an explanation."

"A good idea. But we should go to together," he said. "We'll take my car."

He led me to the back of the hotel to his private garage where he kept a fairly modern Mercedes, and a vintage Porsche convertible. We tried the Mercedes first out of curiosity; it as we suspected: it wouldn't start, the microprocessor in its engine management system having presumably gone the way of everything else. The Porsche however, being of a much older technology started at the first touch, as I trusted my own MG Roadster would do, when I had need of it - both machines pre-dating the age of digital computers. Gruber folded back the roof, and we set off.

We were rounding the side of the hotel when we came across Gabrielle returning from her walk. He pulled over at once, and called out to her. "Mademoiselle, we are driving into town. It is a pleasant run and very scenic. Would you like to accompany us?"

I had to admire his ingenuity, but didn't think for a moment that, after our earlier meeting, Gabrielle would want to come. She averted her eyes, but then seemed to nod in shy assent, and before I knew it he was out of the vehicle and holding the door for her, while she settled into the rear seat. I offered her a polite smile, but did not speak to her. I was still too shaken. Then we were off, Gabrielle's hair blowing in the breeze. She laid her head back and closed her eyes, apparently enjoying the sensation, losing herself in it somehow.

Gruber glanced admiringly at her in the rear view mirror, then at me. "Your watch," he said. "It is English?"

"Yes, made in Liverpool, around 1900. Yours?"

"German,... Hamburg, 1910. If you don't mind my saying, such a thing suggests an interest in the keeping of time - and to rely on it, implies a certain secure knowledge, and a trust in its nature."

"You think too deeply, Herr Gruber. I simply like old watches."

"But watches, clocks, dials," he persisted, "these are archetypes as well, are they not? You are the psychologist, Mr. Graves. You are the disciple of Herr Jung?"

"Nonsense, Herr Gruber. I am merely a writer and an eccentric Englishman. I suppose you're correct though; they are symbols of wholeness, of oneness, of the self. But your point?"

"My point? Does it not strike you that your symbol is one of the few still working? It draws attention to it somewhat."

I laughed. "You're suggesting I've brought the whole of Europe, and possibly the entire world to a halt, as well as destroying every word I've ever written in order to satisfy a deeper psychological need in myself?"

"I'm saying only that it links us in some way. For everyone else time has stopped, you see? Their archetypes are no longer active in our reality. Yet ours go on. We are carried forward." He shrugged. "Into what I do not know, of course."

"My watch is working too," said Gabrielle.

Gruber smiled and gave a satisfied nod. "Of course it is, Mademoiselle.

I would have expected nothing else." And then, glancing at her once more in the rear-view mirror: "Did you enjoy your swim?"

"Yes, thank you."

"It is the perfect spot. You were not disturbed, I trust?"

"Not disturbed in the least, Herr Gruber."

The road climbed out of the pine scented forest and meandered over low, bleak hills, eventually to join the main highway into town. We met with no other vehicles on the way, but coming down to the highway, there was a roadblock, consisting of a few straw bales commandeered from an adjacent meadow, and an old motorcycle that was probably the private property, and the pride and joy, of the policeman who now stood guard, preventing us from going any further. The policeman still wore his helmet. It had a tinted visor which was pulled down over his eyes, lending him a sinister air, though not so sinister as the unbuttoned holster on his hip from which there protruded the grip of a pistol.

Gruber pulled over and stepped out to speak with him. “Be careful,” I urged him.

He looked at me, surprised: “There's nothing to fear,” he replied. “He is a policeman.”

“I know,..”

But in England, policemen did not routinely carry guns, and though they could be just as intimidating, with their belts full of grizzly hardware, they could not be so arbitrarily *deadly* as a man with a gun, and especially a man whose eyes were hidden. It was ridiculous, of course and I was reacting badly to the situation. I needed to take a breath and gain some perspective, except, I had lost everything!

Gabrielle remained quiet on the back seat. I realised she was probably still naked beneath the summer dress, and this moved me enough to take my mind off the policeman. It was perplexing: I thought I'd done with the erotic, having rationalised it out of my system long ago. Come, Richard, I might have said: she is just a woman without underpants, wearing a crumpled dress that's neither flattering nor fashionable. Why should it stir you? Is it only sex, my friend? Then forget the sex, and

remember instead the embarrassment of getting up to go to the bathroom afterwards!

It didn't work. Gabrielle smouldered, and my heart, or my loins, or both, threatened to catch fire.

Her shoulders and her chest were pink now, as if her pale skin had had enough of the sun. Her face too was reddening, as if she were beginning to radiate something through her paleness. This thing I felt, it was not something I could dismiss as a mere psychological phantasm, an unfortunate trick of the mind; it moved within me, yes, but it had a life and a meaning all of its own, and it was pointing me at this strange woman, and it was saying: *Here! Here is something really important and you had better listen*!

"You're burning," I said. "I'll ask Gruber to put up the roof when he returns."

She gave a nod, but turned her eyes away from contact. "*Oui*, *merci.*"

"I'm sorry Mademoiselle, really - about before - by the lake."

"My name is Gabrielle."

"I know."

"And you are sorry for what, exactly?"

"What you ask,... please,... I cannot,... "

"But I asked nothing of you, Monsieur."

"Then I'm mistaken, and I apologise for that also."

She was quiet for a moment, and then she said: "Of course you are not mistaken; there is something I want, more than anything, but it would be too much to ask I suppose - too much to ask of anyone."

"What is it?"

She sighed, then shrugged as if it did not matter, that it was an impossible request, but that she might as well ask anyway: "That when you leave La Maison, you take me with you."

"But,... you don't know me!"

"Not yet, it is true. But I think I would like to."

"No, look,... what you're seeing, what you think you're feeling,... it's a kind of delusion - just the projection of a need - just like I don't really see you when I look at you."

"That all sounds very complicated," she said. "But what does any of it matter? I am not proposing marriage. I've seen the way you look at me and it's enough."

"But it's not like that. I,... I respect you,... I think you're very beautiful, but if I had any intentions at all, which I do not, Mademoiselle, I assure you, they would be honourable."

"That is all the better. It tells me I am not making a poor choice with you. Listen, your bed is empty. So is mine. What more is there to say?"

"Well,... your parents,..."

"Ah yes,.. that is the only condition. You would have to take me far away from them. I don't suppose this would be a difficult thing for you? It does not matter where we go."

"But,... what you're suggesting,... it wouldn't solve anything. You must see that!"

"On the contrary, Monsieur, I think that it would solve everything for me."

"It wouldn't solve anything for me though. Indeed it would complicate my life considerably."

"I understand how you might think it an inconvenience. But in return I can be for you whatever you want me to be. After all, I have spent my life being what others want. You are a man, you decide what you want, and I can pretend to be it."

"Surely you should be yourself, Gabrielle."

"Of course, and when I find myself I will let you know, and be that also, if it pleases you. So we are agreed? *Oui*?"

“What?”

I recalled my conversation with Gruber, and his description of the lust for life being like a breech in a dam. Gabrielle had seized her moment, punched a hole clean through the walls of her containment and what was coming out of her now was not rational; it was an inundation. It was also dangerous and unpredictable. You couldn't handle such a thing rationally, except to turn and run away from it. But instinctively? Instinctively there might have been a way, if only I'd known how.

"I am not for you, Mademoiselle. You must choose someone else. Please."

Gruber returned, shaking his head. "We've had a wasted journey I'm afraid. We can't get any further. The officer tells me the highway is blocked up ahead with broken down vehicles, and the town is impassable. We could go the other way but there's nothing at the end of that road except Italy, on the other side of the mountains. I don't know what to suggest, Mr. Graves. He tells me we should return to the hotel and await further word from the authorities."

"But how will they deal with it?" I asked, too shocked to really take in the magnitude of what I was being told. "No vehicles, no radios,... nothing,... Did he say what caused it?"

"No, the poor man doesn't know any more than we do. But I think he's right, we should return to La Maison; things are much worse than we thought. I need to discuss with Monsieur Lagrange how best to manage our affairs. The kitchens are well stocked, and we haven't many guests at the moment. I dare say we can hold out for several weeks if we're careful. I'm sure we can manage until things return to normal." And then to Gabrielle he said, rather gallantly: "You mustn't distress yourself Mademoiselle. Everything will be all right."

Gabrielle shook her head and smiled dreamily. "But I am not distressed at all, Herr Gruber."

Chapter 7

It was late afternoon when we crested the last of the foothills and began our descent once more to La Maison. The sepia tones were deepening, the edges of the clouds beginning to take on a purple hue, and I fancied I saw a flickering in the azure sky beyond them, as if from a faulty neon light. The flickering became more obvious as the sky deepened into evening shades, so that by the time we drew up at the hotel, there was a gathering of spectators on the lawn, their necks craned upwards, watching, and murmuring with curiosity.

Lagrange, smartly uniformed in waistcoat and jacket, waited by the door, looking to catch Gruber's eye. Gruber shook his head, his expression grave. Madame Lafayette broke off from haranguing Lagrange - this time about ordering another taxi - and instead scolded her daughter, as she unfolded herself from the rear seat of the Porsche. Gabrielle appeared not to hear her. She'd retreated deeply inside herself since we'd spoken, and was drawn back to reality only by the curiously flickering sky.

"Qu'est *ce que ce*?" she asked - addressing me directly, blanking her mother. "What is this?"

"I'm afraid I don't know Mademoiselle."

"It is Gabrielle,... remember? I am *Gabrielle*. You are *Richard*. And people who have seen each other naked, should at least be on first name terms do you not think?"

Madame listened to this in disbelief, then told Gabrielle she had better pack, that they were leaving, even if they had to walk all the way to Zurich. Gabrielle made no indication of having heard, then sighed, and looked to me to provide the explanation she already knew her mother was incapable of trusting her to give.

"I'm sorry Madame," I said. "All the roads are closed. The town is impassible. There has been some sort of emergency. Our instructions are to remain here until we've had word from the authorities."

I might as well have spoken to the wall for all the notice she took of me. Instead, she called out for Gabrielle, looking to shepherd the girl tightly to her side, but Gabrielle had drifted away towards the gathering

on the lawn. Then, like something from a bygone age, I heard a burst of static. Everyone gasped. They'd set up the valve radio in the lounge and Bernadette was exploring the dial on full volume, medium wave, then the short wave frequencies.

The rush and squeal drew me back to my boyhood and those strange night-time sounds of the aether. Then came the voice of the BBC World Service, very faint at first, but growing louder as Bernadette coaxed it in. It was an announcement. As we gathered closer I caught the words: "unprecedented solar event", "ionisation", "volcanic dust", and the thing Gruber and I had most feared, an electromagnetic pulse. Northern and Central Europe, the Baltic states, the Eastern Seaboard of the USA, Northern Russia, all paralysed.

It had not been a weapon then, not a third world war, nor a terrorist outrage, but a rare, naturally occurring phenomenon. It might have happened many times in Earth's history, but not for a few hundred years, which meant we wouldn't have noticed, only now, in our suddenly electronic lives, lives dependent on such microscopic and delicate little pieces of silicon. Bernadette looked up in astonishment. Senior De Luca muttered an oath, then gazed at me in horror. "The casualties, Mr. Graves! Imagine the casualties!"

Bernadette said the announcer had told them casualties were light.

"But,... aircraft," I said. "There must have been thousands of aircraft flying. They would have dropped from the sky, surely?"

"All grounded last night," she replied. "Remember? By the dust."

Carmen, hugged her father. "A miracle," she said.

Madam Lafayette gave an hysterical laugh. "Miracle? Miracle you say?"

I looked at her, trying to find some way of engaging with her and I regret to say I did not try for very long. "Yes, Madame,... as strange as it might sound. It *is* a miracle."

Chapter 8

Gruber insisted the business of the hotel should continue as much as possible in the same vein. He reasoned that people drew comfort from timetables, from routine, from even the smartness of his staff, and anyway it was better than sliding into chaos. He also announced that there would be a dance after dinner on the lawn, to the accompaniment of a pre-electronic gramophone, and a collection of Long Player records that had been unearthed in the basement, along with the valve radio.

There was still power, and a back-up generator if we needed it. Mobile telephones were useless, as were most of the landlines, but Lagrange had found that by doggedly plugging in an old analogue handset, he had succeeded in obtaining a dial tone. There was for a time then a long queue of guests in reception, waiting patiently to dial their friends and families. Most were unsuccessful, and came away looking only the more anxious for their efforts, but a few were able to get through, suggesting some of the exchanges had survived. These small successes took away a little of the uncertainty and the sense of isolation, at least for me, suggesting this was not the apocalypse after all, and that things would eventually be restored to normal. We had only to grin and bear it for a while. I decided to make do as best I could, and to go on as if nothing had happened.

Unfortunately, others were not so sanguine and Gruber's plea for normality went unheeded at first; that evening his staff found themselves presiding over a deserted dining room, the guests preferring to shut themselves in their rooms than face a world without electronic devices. I think it was the loss of their mobile 'phones which bit the deepest. No other device seems to have had such an impact on our lives. They connect us across vast distances, all be it in a trivial sort of way, with our constant texting and checking for messages. They distract us from our selves, and it is perhaps this acquaintanceship with our selves we find most troubling, an irritation that is effectively soothed by continually fondling our pocket communicators.

For me however, the loss of my 'phone hardly mattered. It was rarely switched on, and anyway contained very few numbers: my local mechanic, for whom many a holiday in the sun had been funded in exchange for keeping my MG on the road; there was also my former

agent and a few publishing contacts, all of which were probably out of date now. In short there was no one I was anxious to contact, no one to queue up for in reception, for whom to take my chances on the intermittent land-line, no one who knew I was even here. I told myself I did not care for these things, but if that were true, why, on my first night at La Maison, had I felt so lonely? And perhaps more importantly, why did I feel lonely no longer?

It was the sudden strangeness of the times, I told myself, but I felt all the more a sense of occasion that evening and so made a greater effort than usual in dressing for dinner - shaving more closely, even cleaning up my watch and carrying it in the pocket of a rather old fashioned waistcoat. It was eccentric perhaps, but that was how Gruber wore his, and his retro-style was infectious.

So many have abandoned the art of dressing for dinner as if it were an anachronism. They dress instead with what seems to me like a calculated indifference – jeans, tee shirt - which is surely even more troublesome, for it takes a finicky skill to make “casual” look sophisticated, instead of just scruffy. Gruber had no strict policy on such things, but it felt pointless to dine in such grand surroundings as those which La Maison offered, and not take part, or pay one's respects to it, by not bothering even to wear a clean shirt.

The loss of my laptop, my memory stick and all the accumulated baggage of my thoughts had by now wrought a peculiar transformation. There was still a profound sense of loss, of course, but also I detected what I could only describe as a nascent rebirth. It was as if, no longer weighted down by my old stories, I had bobbed back up to the surface of my life. They had gone, but I was still alive and had to make my way somehow without them. Perhaps Gruber was right; my words were not important. We should live in the moment. And in this moment, those old stories were irrelevant because they no longer existed. I had no choice but to disregard them now. I had no choice but to be philosophical.

Thinking on this, I threaded my gold cuff-links carefully into place and gave them a wipe with my handkerchief. They glinted richly in the evening light coming through my window, and they spoke of something, though I don't know what. It wasn't often I could find a wordless kind of meaning in brief moments like that, less so as I grew older. It required a certain focus of the eye and brain, and a complete lack of distraction. It took me by surprise. I knew this man. It was my self. Then I wondered if Gabrielle and her parents would be in the

dining room, and the moment was lost.

I was the first one down to dinner, though it was not early and I felt at once the sense of abandonment, as if La Maison were a ship and everyone but the crew had taken to the lifeboats. All the polished silver and pressed linen, so carefully presented, had gone to waste. Bernadette waited in the entrance and gave a professional curtsey as I came up to her. It was ridiculously overblown of course, but she softened it with a smile and a cheeky wink. She was indeed a very pretty girl, terribly young of course. Never the less, I found her friendliness flattering and embarrassing at the same time. I was the same with all such girls. They were too young to flirt with, yet too old to treat like children, and they often left me tongue tied.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening Bernadette," I replied, joining in as best I could with her impish humour. "If I may say so, you're looking very lovely this evening."

"Why, thank you, sir."

I was making for my usual unobtrusive table, but she caught up with me and steered me instead to another in an alcove overlooking the gardens. It was the best table,... Gruber's table. What's more Gruber was sitting there, though somewhat pensively, I thought, waiting for me, his watch open before him, and when I sat down he asked for the time. It felt odd to be retrieving my watch, and flipping open the case with such gravity. It was as if we held the world in balance between us, like a pair of ancient gods, that if our watches stopped, the world would end. We found we were only a matter of seconds apart, and agreed this was of no consequence.

I was braced for something. Gruber's conversations were always a challenge, and though we'd spoken at some length on several occasions now, to find myself invited to his table was both an honour yet troubling at the same time. The evening light had deepened, rendering the lawns black, and the lake rippling with silver. The land rose darkly and the snow capped peaks in the blue distance were aflame. I looked from Gruber, to the mountains, and then to Gruber again. If I lived to be a hundred I knew I was going to remember this night for the rest of my life. It possessed a numinous quality, the shadows rich with mystery, and the colours, like the glint of my gold cuff-links, earlier, rich with words, but in a language unknown to me.

"Em,... a poor showing," I ventured, trying to smooth the anxiety from my voice. "Will your dance be going ahead?"

"Of course. Even if the guests are indisposed, I've asked if the staff will avail themselves of the opportunity to let their hair down, so to speak. I do hope you'll be joining us as well."

"I'm a poor dancer, Herr Gruber, but I find I'm looking forward to it all the same."

"Ha! Good fellow. And if I am not mistaken, I think your partner has just walked through the door."

Gabrielle was wearing a yellow evening dress with a wrap about her bare shoulders. Her hair was brushed out, voluminous and glowing, the afternoon's sun having lent a tanned radiance to her face. She held herself well, having risen to her full height and stature once more. She looked magnificent. Gruber paused a moment, his eyes wide, as if mesmerised and for once, speechless. She appeared to be alone.

Bernadette motioned secretly to him from behind Gabrielle's back: a slight shrug and a shake of her head to indicate that, incredibly, neither of her normally tenacious parents were with her. Gruber gestured with his eyes and Bernadette approached Gabrielle, smiled, curtseyed and indicated our table. Gabrielle nodded her assent. We stood at once, as if jolted from our seats.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she said. "I'm afraid my parents are unwell. You have rescued me."

"My pleasure," relied Gruber, having recovered himself. "I'm sorry to hear your parents are feeling poorly. As you can see most guests have also taken to their rooms. There is only Mr. Graves here and myself. We intend to make the best of it. I'm sure things will return to normal by and by, as people adjust to the situation."

"Yes, though you must forgive me if I say I hope you are wrong. The last thing I want is for anything to return to normal."

"Em,... quite. But,... how radiant you look this evening! And you have been touched by the sun I think?"

"Thank you. Touched by other things as well."

"Em,... is Mademoiselle Lafayette not radiant this evening, Mr. Graves?"

Did he ever give up? I nodded my agreement, and she blushed. I felt my stomach heave with a mixture of desire and trepidation, and I blew out a silent curse.

"You know," he went on, "I hope you'll forgive me for saying, but I believe you are two of a kind."

Both Gabrielle and I managed to say "Oh?" at the same time.

"Yes. It strikes me that neither of you are ordinary. This makes you seem ill adjusted under normal circumstances. I've seen this before and it takes a certain, shall we say, disruption of normality, for you to find your feet."

Gabrielle listened to him politely, smiled, then nodded. "Perhaps you are right," she said. "If so, then it is a pity it will not last. What do you think, Richard? Do we find our feet under these circumstances, you and I?"

I was thinking the transformation in her was astonishing. It was the same body, the same hair, the same face, but I would not have recognised her as the same person at all. It was a question of poise, of spirit. And the tone of her voice as she spoke to me was so rich, so intimate it stirred me and set my loins burning so I could not immediately reply. I was,... blushing. My God, how I wanted this woman! And how I wished I could hide it better.

"I,... em,... I find I'm in no hurry for the resumption of normality, Gabrielle. But then I've lived so far outside of it, and for so long, to be frank, I hardly notice the difference any more."

Gruber laughed.

Gabrielle was puzzled. "Outside of normality?"

I was stuck for words - her voice mesmerised me - and it fell to Gruber to explain: "Mr. Graves writes books, he invents realities, lives in them while he writes. So to some extent all things to him are subjective in their nature."

She shook her head, still puzzled. Gruber went on: "For some there is no clear boundary between imagination and reality. Am I right, Mr Graves? For example, in his eyes, you are an archetype, a creature of mythological magic and meaning, what in earlier times we might have called a daemon. I'm sure I fall into the same category. If we're wise to it, you and I, we can capitalise on these fantasies of his, and take advantage of them."

"But to what end, Herr Gruber? It sounds cruel to deceive Richard in this way, on account of his,... delusions."

"Ah, but are they delusions? And is it cruel if our intentions are to transform him for the better?"

"But surely, he is the best judge of what is good for him."

"Of course. But in treating us as archetypes, as daemons he accepts the risks, and grants us the mandate to do as we will, whether he knows it or not."

Gabrielle shook her head. "But what is to be the prize, Herr Gruber? What is to be the symbol of Richard's transformation?"

If they were making fun at my expense I did not mind it. Gruber looked at me. "Well, Mr Graves?... what is it to be?"

"A symbol of my transformation? I cannot say." I searched my memory, my remembered reams of turgid psychological theory. "To reliably transform one's psyche, one must follow the path that opens naturally, I suppose. To decide what one wants beforehand, and to run after it is to tempt an adverse fate. To recognise one's true path as it opens,.. to successfully negotiate life's ambiguities,... that is the prize, I suppose, and the best any of us can hope for."

He waved my over-careful explanation away. "Yes, yes,... but do you accept our challenge?"

Two nights ago Gabrielle had been a timid mouse, sitting between the titanic egos of her parents. Now she played princess, to Gruber's king while the world as we knew it had fallen into chaos. We had no idea what the world was like now beyond the mountain ranges that surrounded La Maison. We had not seen it with our own eyes. It was only the words of the BBC, and our fevered imaginations that filled in

the blanks, while here everything seemed normal for now. It lent an unreal air, as if we might indeed have imagined everything, that we had entered some sort of dreamy fantasy.

"I think I've always accepted it," I said.

Bernadette arrived with menus, but it was a formality; there was only one dish, Lagrange having drawn up a plan of rationing. The only thing not on his list of economies was wine, which Gruber suggested we should consume in greater quantities in compensation for restrictions in other areas. But the meal was hardly austere - trout from the lake, vegetables and herbs from the hotel's own garden - and all prepared with the usual culinary flair that La Maison was famous for.

Gabrielle turned to me, her eyes unflinching, solicitous, even dancing a little: "So,.. you write books, Richard? May I ask what kind?"

"It's hard to explain."

"But you,... make your living by it?"

"I did,... I mean I do,... I once wrote a series of detective stories. For some reason that escapes me, they were very popular. That was years ago, however. They were televised once. I was,... very fortunate. I'm still living off the proceeds. But truth be told they bored me. They were formulaic, the characters paper thin, the things they did were banal, pointless. At best they were predictable and corny,... I write a different kind of story now. At least I did."

"May I read one of your stories?"

"You like detective fiction?"

"No, detective stories bore me. I meant one of your other stories, your later stories."

"Ah. That's not possible I'm afraid."

"But why?"

"All gone, I presume, wiped off my memory stick. But then, as I was explaining to Herr Gruber, I never finished any of them anyway. There was never a conclusion, you see? At least not one that meant anything

to me. Mostly they just ended mid-sentence - yet they were important as beginnings, as potential worlds – imaginary worlds at least. And one of them might have led somewhere, might it not?"

"How many stories like that have you begun?"

"Oh,... hundreds."

"And they were all of them on your memory stick, this *carte mémoire*?"

"Yes."

"And you never kept a duplicate? A back up?"

"No. It was too confusing. It sounds stupid doesn't it? But to have two copies meant I never knew which was the more up to date, so I stopped doing it."

“And you kept nothing on the computer?”

“I never keep anything on a computer. They break down too easily, they get hacked and trashed by viruses, and they can get stolen.”

Gruber listened to all of this with interest. Nothing I'd said surprised him, though it surprised me I could have said it all so easily. The night was tempting out my secrets as if it didn't matter, as if there was no tomorrow to which I might rise, embarrassed I had said anything at all.

He nodded. "And you suspect every one of these stories, these openings has potentially gone?"

"Yes. Stories, notes, essays,... in fact, everything I have ever thought,... about anything. I'm not like other writers, Herr Gruber. I don't write to inform, or persuade people to my way of thinking. To paraphrase the writer Flannery O'Connor, *I write so I know what it is I think and believe in myself*."

"Well,.. perhaps your memory stick is undamaged, only the computer that reads it. You will have to wait to find out. I'm sure *some* computers have survived."

"Some may have survived, yes, but right now I must face the possibility they have not."

"But, if as you say, all your stories were unfinished, what does it matter?"

“They were like pieces of a puzzle, Herr Gruber. I could take bits of one and try slotting them into another. A line, a phrase, a mix of characters, even a single word might suggest another avenue to explore,... it was like,... like a melting pot of ideas.”

“Ah, now I understand! You might have a character in a story who cannot find their way to success, happiness or whatever,... but you take that character from their familiar context and drop them into another story,... and they find their way?”

“Exactly.” At first I thought Gruber was merely perceptive in his understanding of my mode of working, but then I realised he was talking about me now, lifted from my ordinary world and dropped into the strangeness of this new one,.. but I refused to be drawn.

“It may be,” he went on, “That only the *next* story you write is the important one. A difficult thing to predict, I grant you,... without referring to your earlier works. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it will be easier; a clean break with the past. Easier also if you can speak to your archetypes, your daemons in person, easier I mean,... if you let us help you, Mademoiselle Lafayette and I."

"Herr Gruber, you are very persistent with this. Even if you could deliver me the conclusion to my ultimate story, which I doubt, what would you expect from me in return?"

"Must I have a price? If you insist, then let it be my immortality. You must immortalise me and La Maison du Lac."

"How?"

"Why, in your story of course! You might call your story, let me see,... La Maison du Lac, perhaps? As for Mademoiselle Lafayette, if she has a price for allowing herself to be portrayed, I suspect you already know it."

Gabrielle blushed, her mask slipping to reveal her emotions very much on the surface. She gathered herself. “La Maison Du Lac” she said, as if reading it from the title of a book-cover. “It has a certain ring, Herr Gruber but I do not think it is quite right. What do you say Richard?”

I took a step back, inside my head at least. "What are we doing?" I demanded. "We're not ourselves here. We're acting roles,... talking nonsense. This is not really us,... we should stop."

Gruber raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Perhaps you are unfamiliar with your true self. It takes a situation such as this to bring it out."

I looked to Gabrielle for support, for sanity, but she shrugged, as if helpless. "I cannot stop it, Richard. The cork is out for me now. And the wine must either be drunk to the bottom, or left to spoil."

With that came the sound of Gruber pulling the cork from a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. "Admirably put, Mademoiselle." He positioned the bottle over my glass and made ready to pour. "Would you care to taste, Mr. Graves?"

Gabrielle fixed me with a steady gaze, and all I could hear was the pouring of the wine as Gruber filled my glass to the brim.

Chapter 9

After dinner, I did not dance with Gabrielle. These were old dances, you see? Waltz, foxtrot, tango, quickstep, all of which required a man to touch a woman, and I could not touch her. Her voice alone was enough to set every atom of my being resonating dangerously to the richness of her tone. To have touched her, I fancy I would have burst into flames or, less dramatically, fallen down in an embarrassing faint, so agitated was I in her presence.

Fortunately, Gruber was enlivened by the music, also by the wine, and was consequently less attentive to me. Instead, as the gramophone began to play its first scratchy waltz, he offered his hand to Gabrielle, and she nodded her assent. I then took the opportunity of distancing myself, of observing them from the shadows, hoping perhaps they would become so bound up in the evening, and in each other, they would forget about me, and what appeared now to be a peculiar pact between them: that they should assume roles of mythical, daemonic and quite fantastic meaning. To me.

Gabrielle could not dance, but after what seemed like only moments in Gruber's company she was granted the grace and poise of a dancer as surely as if he had enchanted her. As for the rest, his skilful lead ensured she did not put a foot wrong. As she took her first steps out on the lawn, she wore a tight expression, but by the second or third dance, her lips were parted in a breathless smile, her eyes aglow and she had relaxed, as if into a dream. One could not help but admire the man - he was such a charmer and I did not wonder that many a woman might have given herself to him gladly, in exchange for being made to feel so regal in his company.

As, one by one, the evening staff came off duty, they joined in with the dance and began to swell our numbers. I saw Bernadette transformed, her uniform exchanged for a pretty floral dress, her polished, upright manners abandoned for a slinky sway of the hips as she danced with the dashingly handsome Anton. Some of the guests also, began to drift downstairs, lured by the gay music, and the sound of laughter. I exchanged nods with Signor De Luca and his girls as they came out to join in.

Gruber received their arrival with a look of gracious satisfaction, and I

was happy for him that his evening was beginning to liven up. Indeed, soon, there was a respectable party upon the lawn, by the lake, beneath the stars. Consequently, I began to feel less vulnerable to his machinations, and more anonymous in the darkness, like the invisible observer of life I have always told myself I am.

I turned my gaze from the dancers to the movement of the sky. There still came the occasional flicker of light from the few clouds remaining in a dome of late evening that was clearing as rapidly as it was darkening. But there was no sound, as with lightning. It was most strange, unlike anything I had seen before, and also hauntingly beautiful.

Signor De Luca stood with me for a while, smoking. "You know," he said. "One cannot but have the feeling of falling through time."

"Yes, curious isn't it? We'd come to rely so much on technology, yet already we're beginning to forget it, at least for this evening."

He thought a while, perhaps still lamenting the demise of his four thousand Euro watch, as I still secretly lamented the loss of my old stories. “You are not dancing, my friend?"

"Not if I can help it. I'm enjoying watching the others."

He laughed. "You will be lucky to escape with watching. We men are outnumbered by the ladies this evening, and these days, you know, it is not like in olden times, when they waited demurely to be asked."

He was pulled into the dance by Carmen, who winked cheekily at me. I moved more deeply into the shadows in case her sister, Natalie, came looking for a partner. I was even wondering, rather churlishly, if I dared sneak inside to my room, when Bernadette stole up unseen on my flank, tapped me on the arm, and asked if I would dance with her. I sighed in graceful defeat, then smiled, unable to resist her charming girlishness, and I allowed her to lead me out onto the lawn.

She felt so light, so elven suddenly, I wondered if she could possibly be real. I had been this age once, and in those days girls of this age had seemed so mature, so knowing. They still possessed an allure for me of course, though in what sense I could no longer fathom; it was not sexual, surely - for a man of middle years like me to think sexually about such a girl as this was only to tarnish her. It was another

enigma, one I would probably have to wait for old age, decrepitude, and the complete dissolution of the last vestiges of my libido before I finally made peace with it.

"You dance well," I told her. It was already the second tune, and my reserve was beginning to dissolve into a delicious enjoyment.

"But I'm making it all up as I go along," she laughed. "Ah, look! There is Herr Gruber, watching us. I can read his thoughts."

"Oh? And what is he thinking?"

She nodded, her brow furrowed with mock gravity. "I am in trouble."

"He disapproves of you dancing with me?"

"Oh no, it is not that you are dancing with me, but that you are *not* dancing with Mademoiselle Lafayette. It is time we swapped. I am monopolising you."

"Em, I have no intentions of dancing with Mademoiselle Lafayette. In fact, I was about to disappear to my room and barricade myself in."

"I know," she said, frowning. "Herr Gruber suspected as much and asked me to detain you." She laughed beautifully. "You cannot escape, you know? You have been on the edge of life all of your life, like on that little table in the restaurant, yes? But tonight, you are caught up in the middle. Tonight it is you we all dance for."

"Have you been drinking, Bernadette?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Of course, yes."

"Then it's as well I've been drinking too, or I would have to pretend I understood your meaning, if only to appear polite. Now, if we must exchange partners, would you mind if we sought out one of the De Luca girls - I'm probably safer with them."

She gave me a wink, then leaned close and whispered: "That's not what I've heard, sir."

Gruber had indeed found us out and approached now with a sly grin that gave the impression he would not take no for answer. "Would you

mind if I cut in?" he said.

Then he and Bernadette took off into the mêlée and Gabrielle, who had but a moment ago seemed so light and alive on his arm, became once more quiet beside me, her mood languorous, her eyes hooded. I was conscious of the return of a palpable heaviness between us, and wished it did not have to be this way, that we could dance and laugh together as I had been doing a moment ago with Bernadette, that Gabrielle too could be light and alive and lovely with me, for then it would mean nothing and we could exchange partners and be done with it soon enough. But of course what was growing between us demanded an altogether different kind of denouement.

"Richard?"

"I cannot, Gabrielle. You don't understand. Everything I have lost: a million words, they were all of them groping towards some kind of personal enlightenment; if I were to touch you, if I were to become any more lost to the illusion of what you mean to me, then you will steal all of my words, do you see? And I will never get them back. My whole life will have been a waste."

She shook her head, bewildered. "I did not steal your words. You *gave* them to me, and there is only one way to get back what you think you have lost." She gave a little shrug and a quick flash of a smile.

“How?” I asked.

“Why,... dance with me,... that's all.”

It was a hauntingly lovely gesture and the music sounded suddenly so sweet as it echoed from the unseen mountains in the darkness all around us. What harm could there possibly be in just *dancing* with her? It might even cure me of the fallacy that she meant anything at all, if I could only bring myself to touch her!

I held out my hand, and she would have taken it, but at that moment her parents appeared in their dressing gowns, like spectres at the feast. Gabrielle's hatchet faced mother had already dispatched her father, like a torpedo to strike us amidships. Gabrielle drew back in surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"Em, that's just what we were discussing, sir. Though frankly I am at a loss to explain it at all."

Gabrielle covered her amusement, though I'm afraid he thought less well of it. "Gabrielle, you will return to your room," he said coldly.

But Gabrielle didn't shrink as I'd thought she might. She maintained her stature, her grace, so that when she smiled at me and turned away, as if to obey her father, I knew she had something else in mind entirely, that her resolve, and her father's attempt to wrestle back control of her would only result in some new level of disobedience. I feared for him, and for her, but most of all I feared for myself, caught, as I seemed to be, between them now.

"You will desist from contact with my daughter, Monsieur."

"Truly, I am going out of my way to avoid it, sir."

"You do not understand, I think. My daughter is very ill."

This drew me up. "I'm,... I'm truly sorry to hear that."

"The slightest thing can set her back years. She is very,... fragile."

"Em,..."

"I will not permit it. Do you hear me?"

"Sir,.. there's no need to raise your voice. I hear you very well. This is such a lovely evening. A lovely atmosphere. The music, the dancing. People are so happy. They've forgotten their anxieties, and you are creating a scene. So,... please. You may rest assured I have no intentions of,... upsetting your daughter."

That I had spoken to him at all in words anything less than submissive, seemed only to puff him up even more. He turned away, his teeth clenched angrily, and he rejoined his fearsome lady.

I could no longer see Gabrielle and assumed she'd retired for the evening. I felt sorry for her. Still, she'd danced with Gruber – the old charmer - and I'd seen her smile more radiantly than I'd believed she was capable of. She'd had her night out under the stars, and most of all, I'd successfully avoided dancing with her.

Chapter 10

Even at midnight the air was still warm. The dancing continued, slower now, more people sitting and watching, and simply enjoying the air. Gruber joined me as I sat in a wicker chair by the darkly rippling waters of the lake. There was something impatient in his manner as he sank into the chair beside mine.

"Damn that man!"

"Herr Gruber?"

"You were on the verge of success, my boy, and he ruined it."

"Oh,... you mean Gabrielle's father? Well, either that or I was on the brink of ruining myself, and he saved me."

He turned, his features narrowed. Did he despair? Was he perhaps even a little angry with me? I'd not seen him like this before and realised suddenly that this was not a game at all for him, not some fanciful little entertainment. But what else could it be? He looked at me closely for a moment, understood perhaps that I was being ironic, and allowed me a smile. I was still a game fish, he thought, a fish he had half a chance of landing.

"Monsieur Lafayette did say something curious though," I told him.

"Oh?"

"That Gabrielle was ill. What do you know of that?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Pah! You have only to look at her. How nineteenth century! No doubt she has had her *neuroses* probed to indecent depths by the best psychiatrists in all of Europe. And if any of them were worth their exorbitant fees they will have told Gabrielle the nature of her sickness is one of confinement, that it is her parents who confine her, that indeed it is her *parents* who are her only sickness."

He gave an impatient harrumph, then lit a cigar.

"I'm sorry, Herr Gruber, you're angry. You shouldn't be. Everyone's enjoyed this evening - indeed I fancy they will dance 'till dawn. I've enjoyed it too. You've turned a state of emergency into one of the most memorable occasions of my life. Thank you. If nothing else my stay this week at La Maison is proving to be an unforgettable one."

He relaxed. "It was a success, I think. And did you ever see Gabrielle more alive than this evening? More beautiful?"

"Well,... no, but then I have to keep reminding myself I only met her the other day, and that I don't really know her at all, that most of what I imagine her to be like is just that: *imagination*."

“But such is always the case with daemons. She is your muse, Mr Graves. We meet the daemons in dreams all the time, do we not? And we know them instantly as old friends, as familiar lovers. We need no lengthy introductions, no foreplay because we have always known them – we merely pick up where we have left off before.”

“But this is not a dream.”

“Isn't it? Just look at the sky. Look there.” As the night had come on, the sky had completely cleared. It was starlit, and the northern horizon was overhung with great curtains of luminous green light. The Aurora Borealis. “I've never seen it this far south before,” he went on. “The sun is very active, as we know. There's been a massive solar flare, and then the volcanic ash – these things may have combined somehow. I'm sure there's a scientific explanation for what's happened,... but just look at it. Can you think of anything more beautiful and dream-like? Does it not touch your soul, Mr Graves?”

I wanted to tell him it was only the Northern Lights, but I'd never seen them before at all, and they held me spellbound. And yes,... they *did* touch my soul, for what else could make me feel that way? What else could make me marvel at the magical nature of life, when all the rational evidence suggested magic did not exist?

He watched me struggling for words. “You would have danced with her, wouldn't you?” he said “I mean without the unfortunate interruption."

I sighed, defeated and mesmerised by the beauty of the sky. "I was at the point of submission, yes. And gladly so."

He placed his hand upon my arm, something urgent in his grip. "Do you understand how important this is, my friend?"

"To you?"

"To all of us. We cannot be defeated, you know? We must *rescue* Gabrielle, and in doing so rescue ourselves. This is *our* story, Mr. Graves, and unlike all those others you have struggled with, this one shall have its conclusion. And it *will* mean something."

“If only I could believe that.”

“You need only entertain the possibility, open the door to the idea and all will be well. Mademoiselle Lafayette and I shall do the rest for you. Have you spoken with her much?”

"A little. It seems you're right, she has her eye on freedom, and she *will* take it, whatever price she has to pay."

"I knew it!"

He shook his fist in triumph, but I cautioned him: "I only hope she doesn't lay waste to us both in the process."

"Both of us, you say?"

"Herr Gruber, if I did not know any better, I'd say it was you who was in love with her."

He smiled knowingly, but did not explain himself, preferring as always to leave me stewing in the turmoil of my thoughts. All I had to go on was the fact that he did not deny he was in love with Gabrielle!

Chapter 11

I was still sitting out by the lake in the small hours, finishing off the cigar Gruber had given me in parting. I was alone now. Time and weariness had become curiously irrelevant. The air was still warm, the aurora still stretched across the northern sky, like a patchy mist, drifting back into long, wavy curtains, then mist again. My mind seemed sharper than it had by day, though I suspected this was an illusion brought about by fatigue and the extraordinary scenes before me now.

For a moment I suspected it was also an illusion, the vision of Gabrielle, as she came stealing over the grass. I had to look carefully and deliberately focus in the strange light in order to confirm to my satisfaction she was indeed flesh.

She was wearing ivory silk pyjamas and bedroom slippers, and she held a thick book to her bosom, its cover decorated in rich paisley patterns. Silently, nymph like, she came, then sat beside me in the chair Gruber had only recently vacated. She crossed her legs and leaned back, breathing deeply of the air. “How strange it is,” she said.

“Yes. Strange”

“So beautiful,...” she went on, and then, in a whisper, almost lost in the night: "I went up to your room."

"Then it's fortunate for us both I was not there."

She laughed softly. "I meant only to give you this." She offered me the book. It was a journal, its pages blank. “I saw Bernadette in reception, and she said I might find you here.”

"It's a fine book." I said.

"I was given it,... oh,... years ago. I thought I could use it to write down my dreams, or something."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was afraid to spoil the pages by making a mark in them. And my

dreams in those days,... they were ugly and I did not want reminding of them – better to let them go the way of all dreams. I'd like you to have it. You don't look like you'd be afraid to make a mark – you're a writer after all. You could use it to write your story, like Herr Gruber said. He's a little eccentric, and playful, but he could be right, you know? It could be your most important story, the one that means everything to you. You *do* still know how to write, don't you? I mean with a pen."

It was my turn to laugh. "I can probably remember. But you're wrong, I'd be afraid to mark these pages too. And there are so many of them!"

"Then it doesn't matter if you make some false starts, does it? Take it. Please."

I noted it bore her name on the very first page. She'd made a half hearted attempt at erasing it, but I could still make it out. This made the book very valuable of course, in spite of myself. If nothing else, I would keep it on my shelf at home, and take it down occasionally to remember my time here, and to remember her. But the pages would remain blank. The thought of it filled me with regret for it implied we had no future, that we were destined only to part at the end of our brief time at La Maison. It's what I'd wanted if course, what I'd assumed, only yesterday, but now,...

"Thank you, Gabrielle. I shall treasure it."

"No, don't treasure it. You must promise me you will use it, or I shall take it back right now."

"All right. I will. I promise. "

"*Bien*. What did my father say to you, after I'd gone?"

"That you were unwell. That I should not upset you. That I should stay away from you. Is it true? Are you unwell?"

She gave a scowl. "Do I look unwell?"

"Not tonight, no, nor when I saw you by the lake this afternoon. Only when you are between them, and they're guarding you. Then you seem,... different."

"What you see when I am with them is not myself, Richard. They

deflate me." She shook her head at the memory of that afternoon. "Yes,... by the lake,... it was shameless of me. I'm sorry. You must think me wanton."

"No,... but from the tone of your voice when you spoke to me, I felt how very desperate you were for freedom, for any kind of life, so long as it could be your own."

She gasped. "You felt all of that, and yet you refused me?"

"I'm sorry. I feel ashamed for it now, but what can I do? I am a stranger."

She sighed. "I know I'm not much of a prize for a man, bent out of shape as I am, but I clean up well, and with the right clothes I'm told I can be at least decorative. And you are no longer a stranger to me, Richard."

I couldn't tell if she was joking, or if she really thought so little of herself as that. "I'm not looking for decoration," I told her. "What I'm looking for is a salve for this ache in my soul, and it does not come in a woman's shape. I used to think it did, but really, it never has, and it never will."

"You're wrong," she said. "It comes in *my* shape. It must, because you created me exactly as I am, in the image of what is missing inside of you. If you want the words to describe it, you have only to know me, and to take me with you."

"I made you?"

"How can you not have done, since this is your story and you are writing it."

"All I know is your father said,..."

"He said what you wanted him to say. You look for reasons to doubt me, and had my father speak them to you, to voice what is already in your head, that I am unwell, neurotic,... dangerous. Blah-di-blah-di-blah!" She rolled her eyes theatrically. "*Oui,... peut être!* Perhaps I am dangerous!"

"But Gabrielle, these pages are blank. I've not written *anything*."

"Then I am quoting from some future time, when it *is* written. And it *will* be written, Richard. I know it."

Gruber had said something similar, and I'd not understood that either. "Gabrielle, the night is strange and very warm. We've all had a little too much to drink. In the morning, we'll be embarrassed we ever had this conversation."

"No, we are both sober now. And if you are warm, why don't we go for a swim? The night will clothe us and the water will feel like silk upon our skins."

“I thought I was the one writing the story, and that doesn't sound like a good idea to me."

“Oh?”

“Gabrielle, I'm a foolish middle aged man, and you're a dangerously sexy woman.”

"Ah,... well, not all good ideas are productive. It is sometimes the bad ones that are the most fertile in the long run. These bad ideas,... you know,.... they break things, and we build something new from the mess. Good ideas only seem good at the time because we are afraid to change, afraid to escape the status-quo. Only simple minds need fear chaos, Richard."

"And you know this because?"

She gave a shrug as if it were perfectly obvious. "Because I am your muse. You think it is *your* story, but remember you don't write a word without my say so, and only if you are kind to me, and sometimes not even then."

She ran her finger under the collar of her pyjamas, sought the soft flesh there and stroked it, as if trying to tease my eye. "Well?" she said. "Are we going swimming or not?"

Of course I wanted to swim. I wanted to stand by the lake shore and see her divested of those silken things. I wanted to see her clothed only in the warm velvet night. Then I wanted to gather her to me and caress her with my fingertips.

"If your parents knew you were here?..."

She raised her finger to her lips and shushed me. "Don't even think it. Or they will be already stealing over the lawn to surprise us. Richard, there will never be another time like this, another chance. Soon the world will be ordinary again, because that is its nature, and if we are not careful we will be sucked back into that ordinariness, and nothing will have changed. There you will be, sitting in the sidelines looking on at the world as it passes you by, and I will be back in my prison between them. The moment will be lost and all we will have are regrets that we did not take our chance when we had it."

Just then the lights failed in the hotel, and for a moment the world was plunged into darkness, except for the strange ethereal glow of the aurora. There were gasps of surprise from the few revellers still shuffling on the lawn, now half asleep, as they danced. Then the generator grumbled into life, and the lights came back on, though enfeebled now and wavering. Throughout this momentary interlude, Gabrielle did not flinch.

"I wonder how long it will last," I said.

"You are thinking of the generator, Richard?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"This,.... hallucination."

"Is that how you see it?"

"I don't want to swim, Gabrielle. But listen,... there's a folly,... a pavilion, a little further round the lake. Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Might we,... be able to make our way there, do you think?"

She caught her breath, and even in the darkness I saw her pupils dilating. I was barely able to contain the beating of my heart as I spoke. What was I saying? It was the perfect place to make love, to consummate the madness of this night. And the night had crept up on

me, overwhelmed me, and now my mind was expanding with the vision of her, my veins running with the imagined silken feel of her pyjamas, the imagined silken softness of her skin,... her hair. And, like that afternoon, I'd begun to ache alarmingly, desperately, urgently for a deep, dark knowledge of her.

"You understand," she said, "there will be a price to pay for such a thing?"

I drew up. "A price?"

"I will go with you to the pavilion, yes. But for it to mean anything, you must prove your trust."

"Trust? In you?"

She gave me a mysterious smile. “I am your muse. You would be unwise to trust in me at all. It is more perhaps your trust in this unknown thing that is between us. It is your,... *sincérité*, your commitment to it, Richard, your *engagement, tu connais*?"

"You mean to set me a test then? If it's murdering your parents I won't do it. Anything else, you can name it."

She laughed. "Oh,... but how *dramatique*! Would you murder them if I asked?”

“Em,...”

She caught my arm. “No,... no,... relax. I mean I have fantasised about it from time to time, you know, but as a solution it is too extreme, and they mean well in their own way. No, Richard, for now it is only your memory that I ask. Can you destroy it? Can you crush it, between rocks if need be and throw the dust that remains into the lake? For this to mean anything, there must be nothing left of what you thought before, no chance that you might ever revert back to those old stories, those old ways of thinking and of being."

She was talking about the memory stick on which resided all my words, my old stories, as she put it,... my notes, my thoughts. I was already convinced they were dead and gone, but Gruber had perhaps mischievously reminded me that they might be recovered when the world found its feet again. She knew I might yet be clinging to the

possibility of it, and it spoke of ego, of attachment to those old values. This came nowhere near the mythical dimensions the night was demanding of us, the complete abandonment of all reason to this moment. It was a bad idea of course, but as she had said it was the seemingly bad ideas that were sometimes the most fertile in the long run.

She would go with me anyway, to the pavilion, I thought. She would lay down with me on those soft cushions, and we would make love, but she was also saying I would not ask this of her because it would have been such an ordinary thing, an insult in fact, a degradation, a defilement. I had to cast off the past first, shrug off the old philosophy, and then to lie with her would be less a pleasure, hurriedly snatched, and more something that would shatter and remould both our lives. And if you thought too long about a thing like that you would never do it, would you? Courage is so often a thing of the moment.

"All right." I said. "I'll bring it to the pavilion. You can watch me sacrifice it."

She was surprised. "You will do it?"

Did she think me incapable? I suppose I might have been, and looking back it was a kind of madness, but everything was urging me do it, and her words,... her words haunted me: *Soon the world will be ordinary again, because that is its nature, and if we are not careful we will be sucked back into that ordinariness, and nothing will have changed.*

“Yes, I'll do it.”

“And then we shall become lovers, and you will take me with you when you leave?”

“Yes.”

She could not allow me time to change my mind now, could not wait another day. "Then go,” she urged. “Fetch it from your room. I will meet you at the pavilion.”

“Do it now, you mean? Right now?”

”Yes, hurry. The world is suddenly so strange, Richard, we cannot safely assume there will even be a tomorrow."

Chapter 12

I have an image of her walking away, her pyjamas eerily luminous in the night, and with the lazy sweeps of the aurora drifting slowly above her as she headed around the lake path, towards the pavilion. She looked back just once, and fixed me with her gaze as if to check my resolve, check that I did not mean to let her down this time. I gave her a reassuring nod, then slipping through the remaining revellers upon the lawn, I sought my room and the memory-stick. As I went, I tried not to catch anyone's eye in case they detained me. My heart was beating wildly, and I thought I would die. It was impossible,... impossible, the thought that I might soon be lying with Gabrielle!

When I took it from the drawer, it looked so fragile suddenly, this little cylindrical sheath of plastic. It contained what? A microcircuit, and a supporting array of silly little resistors and capacitors? How could I ever have fooled myself that the answer to my life could lie in such a thing? What did it matter what had gone before? Surely only the future,... no only the *present moment* could contain the enlightenment, and the sheer delirious sense of life that I sought?

How perverse we are! How fickle our moods! Only hours ago I'd been devastated at the thought of its loss. And now, just as I was allowing myself to believe there was a slim chance it had survived, I was only too eager to ensure its destruction in exchange for what remained of this night, and the arms of a woman I'd sworn I did not want. But such are dreams, such are the fascinations and obsessions to which we're prone when we allow ourselves to be intoxicated and possessed by the daemons that move unseen within us. Heedless to common sense, I slipped the thing into my pocket and made haste to rejoin her.

Meanwhile Madame Lafayette was in the foyer complaining to the night manager that her daughter was not in her room, and had he seen her? The night manager, a silent, bearded fellow, looked confused – no doubt unused to seeing anyone around at this hour. While he dredged the still waters of his mind for the words to answer her, I tried to sneak past. I could easily have told her I'd not seen Gabrielle, but I was still carrying the journal, thinking I might pen the first words of my new story while basking in the afterglow of whatever it was that was about to pass between us.

Of course, her mother saw me and recognised it. "That belongs to my daughter I think."

"She's made me a gift of it, Madame."

She stalked boldly up to me and made as if to snatch the book. I was horrified at the thought of its loss, and moved it deftly behind my back. Then I stood square and firm before her. "Madame, please."

"Where is my daughter?"

"She was by the lake, when last I saw her." This seemed the lesser deception. I had not exactly lied, only avoided telling her where I believed her daughter now to be.

She made one more attempt to snatch the book, but seeing my resolve, she sneered at me instead. "Very well, you may keep the book, but you'll never have my daughter."

"Surely, Madame, is it not your daughter's business on whom she chooses to grant the gift of her company?"

She slapped me then. There was no warning. It was a stinging blow that took my breath away, and the night manager's eyes widened in surprise. I'd not reckoned on this. It had been meant more as an insult than to injure, but it's sting was considerable. She enjoyed my discomfort, and my embarrassment, even stepping back to gain a better view of it, her eyes narrowing into combative slits. To her I was clearly beneath contempt.

I understood now that no matter how far Gabrielle managed to flee from this fearsome harpy, she would always be looking over her shoulder, and so would any man she happened to be with. Was I mad for thinking of entangling myself with her? I shook the thought clear, ashamed of it. No! I *had* to rescue Gabrielle.

"I don't understand your anger, Madame."

"This is not anger Monsieur. It is resolve. If you are going to her now, as I suspect you are, then you can tell her she must be in her room the next time I check."

This was laughable. Gabrielle was a grown woman, yet they treated

her like a child. "But Madame,..."

"If she is not, then I will assume the worst, and what's more I will know who is responsible for it. You have been warned that my daughter is not well. To take advantage of her disability would be a serious thing for you."

"Her,... *disability*? But Madame your daughter is perfectly well."

"And you have known her for how long, Monsieur? I do not see how this makes you an expert. Consider very carefully then; a thing like this,... it can easily ruin a man."

"You would accuse me of what exactly?“

She sighed. “If I must spell it out for you.”

“I'm afraid you must Madame.”

“The indecent assault of a mental incompetent.”

I laughed. “But Gabrielle would deny any wrong-doing She's a grown woman, perfectly capable of,..."

"No one will take my daughter's word as meaning anything,” she cut in. “If you knew her history you would understand she is not in control of her emotions, nor her,... morals."

I was horrified. "Is this how you've seen off all her potential suitors? How can you value your daughter so little?" I'd thought her oppression more subtle than this. But this,... this was monstrous! How could a man not act? "Madame, there are no policemen, no doctors here. There is no straitjacket of normality any more. And your daughter has a mind of her own."

Madame Lafayette looked almost pitying at me. "No, Monsieur, she does not - at least not one that she can rely upon for sound judgement. For judgement, she relies upon me."

I left the hotel and walked briskly into the darkness, all the while feeling those narrowed eyes upon me. Was she following? Was she looking to see which way I'd gone? I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of a backwards glance. I also took a precautionary detour, looping around

the rear of the hotel. I was furious! How dare she strike me? How dare she threaten me with the authorities for daring to interfere with her daughter, as if I were some sort of pervert and Gabrielle a sick child, suffering from some sort of mental impairment, one that rendered her incapable of governing her own life, even her own lusts! I laughed, though it was hardly funny. There was nothing wrong with Gabrielle. Was there?

I slipped by the garage where Gruber's Porsche still sat out upon the gravel. I remembered the sight of Gabrielle on the back seat that afternoon – how impressive, how beautiful she'd been. And then I remembered her by the lake - how stunning, how erotic, how utterly desirable. You couldn't be like *that*, look like that, and be so ill could you? And how reliable a judge was I anyway? I was projecting so much onto her already, could it not have rendered me blind to what should have been obvious all along?

I took a path by the edge of the garden, screened by shrubbery and finally, confident of my invisibility, I stole quietly down to the lake once more. Here I picked my way along the shoreline until the pavilion rose into view. I was feeling calmer now, but as I grew calmer, I began to think more rationally. What if there really was something wrong with her? She seemed extraordinary to me, but of that extraordinariness could some part of it not be attributed to insanity? No,... no,... I made an effort to push the notion from my mind. It was ridiculous; Gabrielle was my liberation, my hope for the future, for the discovery of the meaning to my life. And if she was ill in some way,... then *I* would take care of her.

Chapter 13

It was further than I remembered, to the pavilion, and I felt guilty at having allowed Gabrielle to come all this way wearing only her pyjamas. Still, I thought, the distance would help guarantee our privacy, especially at this hour. The aurora still flickered and drifted in leisurely waves across the northern blackness, reassuring me that the magic of the night, the thing that had bewitched and intoxicated me, had not yet died. I had to put aside all reservations and do the one thing I had set out to do.

As I drew nearer to the pavilion I saw a faint light burning there - a lantern. Gabrielle must have had lit it. I entered between the pillars, unsure if I should warn her about her mother's threats. But I didn't want to agitate her, nor upset her smoothly sensuous resolve to disobey, and to live, and to make love,... to me. Was this wrong? I did not know. I only knew I was suddenly and quite deliriously caught up in the spell she had cast.

She was curled up on the cushions, her face lit by the glow from the lantern she'd placed upon the central stone plinth. She was sleeping, an attitude of perfect composure and deep languor. My hunger collapsed at the sight of her, to be replaced by compassion and, yes,... more than a little disappointment. I did not want to wake her because it seemed cruel now. Instead, I laid my jacket over her and sat down to keep watch. It was after three. In another few hours, the dawn would come seeping in, and we would lose what little was left of the magic of the night. Obviously I'd been wrong, and this was not our time after all.

By degrees the aurora faded, and with it I felt the enchantment slipping away, the spectre of sanity returning. Perhaps it was in order to hold onto the irrational sense that I laid the book beside the lantern and settled down to write, to recapture something of the madness and the beauty of the night, and these past few days. There was light enough to see, so I opened the book to the first page, took out a pencil embossed with the words “Maison Du Lac” then waited for the first words, but the blankness of the page, and the sheer tactile beauty of the book - even its scent - the scent of Gabrielle, overwhelmed me, and I could not write. I could not even think, and stared out instead over the waters of the lake, resigned to a kind of blissful defeat,... and to await the dawn.

Its first glow had touched the terracotta coloured pillars of the pavilion when Gabrielle gave a muted cry, as if remembering something. She stirred. "Richard? Why did you not wake me?"

"I was enjoying watching you sleep."

She saw the book, the pencil. "Have you been writing?"

"No. I couldn't. I need to meditate a little more on things before I know where to start with all of this. There's so much to think about, and I understand none of it."

She sat up sleepily and rubbed her eyes. "I must look like death?"

"If that's the worst you ever look, I don't think you should complain."

She brushed the hair from her face then squeezed her eyes shut and blinked the sleep from them. "Did you bring it?"

I showed her the memory stick, held it out, dangling it by its chord. “Maybe once it's gone,” I said. “I'll no longer be haunted by the possibility that all these useless words have survived,... and then I can begin anew. Then I'll be able to write properly.”

She didn't seem so confident now. "Are you sure?" she said. "It seems so final, you know?"

I'd already found a pair of rocks from the shore, one of them flat to use as an anvil, the other round to use as a hammer. I'd set them up on the dressed stone plinth, in the centre of the pavilion. What with the lantern burning, it looked like an altar, and that we were preparing a ritual sacrifice. I laid the memory stick upon the anvil and made ready with the other rock to strike.

"Wait," she said.

"You've changed your mind?"

She looked anxious, agitated, then shook her head. "No," she said. “I'm ready.”

She began fumbling with the buttons of her pyjama top, but I'd not meant it in that way,... not the sex,... more the game itself, that she'd

changed her mind about the *game*, that she could be my muse, my soul. But this was no longer the Gabrielle of last night, no longer the goddess come to set me a trial in exchange for my enlightenment. The dawn had unsettled her, chased the daemons out of her, and restored a little of the timid girl.

She undid the bottom button and the silk parted to reveal her navel and a soft, round belly. Another button and I would have seen the curve of her breasts, but her hands were trembling. I shook my head and she stopped, her brow raised.

“You do not want me now?”

"Of course I want you,” I said. “But we've lost the moment. We're both sober, now."

There are times when imagination and reality converge. They are times of true meaning, times when the world speaks in a mysterious language, one we understand instinctively, in our hearts, but there is also a tide to them, and when the tide ebbs, all actions become meaningless. We were too late for it now. There was no enchantment. We would have to wait for it to return.

"Let me walk you back to the hotel," I said.

She lowered her eyes and nodded. Her gloominess touched me, and I thought of her mother waiting, arms folded, a look of smug satisfaction on her face, that Gabrielle's bid for freedom had brought her nothing. I couldn't bear it. I could see her shrinking, see the spirit leaking out of her, and I wanted to change the moment, to charge it with magic anew, but for now we existed in the margins, in the shadowy regions. What was growing between us could not yet withstand the full glare of the sun.

“So,” she said, “does this mean you will not be taking me with you, now?”

“Gabrielle,... “ I offered her my hand. “I *will* take you with me,... yes.”

She brightened. “You will? You really mean it?”

“Of course.”

She smiled at that, cradling my hand in both her own, examining it, turning my palm and tracing the lines with her fingertips. And her touch, those first touches of her skin against mine, were perfect. “You are very kind,” she said. “And I think you mean it, but we are each of us vulnerable to the fickleness of the moment. When the time comes, we will probably not even shake hands when we part.”

“You're wrong. Too much has already passed between us.”

“You don't know me.”

“I think that's my line isn't it? But you're my muse, you said, so I must have known you all my life. Something will happen. We *will* have our moment. Our story will be written.”

“But will it be a happy ending?”

I paused. Sometimes a happy ending can be meaningless. Sometimes only a tragedy makes sense. Was that how it would be between us? How many of the truly powerful stories ended well, with the hero and the heroine living happily ever after? But equally, there were times when a poor story tried to steal into the company of its betters by contriving a tragic finish when a happy one would have done just as well. But what choice did I have in any of it?I could not make it up. I was only the writer. Our story was our story. It was what it was and it took us wherever it wanted.

Just then, there came a low throbbing sound and Gabrielle pointed to a light, way out over the lake. Incredibly, it was a helicopter; massive, bulbous, twin rotors, bristling with antennae. The military? It appeared to be making straight for us. There was something unwelcome in this, I felt. It did not pause, did not even seem to see us as it flew in over our heads.

Gabrielle covered her ears against the roar and the rush of wind. I looked up to see the the tail-ramp had been lowered. Visored soldiers hung out lazily, enjoying the ride, guns on hips. We watched it hovering in the vicinity of the hotel, the ornamental trees bending alarmingly in the down-wash. I had a curious flashback to my early childhood and the sight of green helicopters over the hills of Antrim. In those days such machines had either been to protect or oppress us, depending on which side of the sectarian divide you sat. Like most, I straddled the divide uneasily, ambivalent, yet always afraid at the sight of guns no matter who wielded them. Perhaps that's why I'd been so

easily seduced by Englishness because in England ordinary people never a saw a gun, not even on the hip of a policeman.

"It's landing," I said. "We should go and see."

She took my arm and pulled me back, crouching down for cover. "No," she said, and I felt such a fear in her!

I crouched beside her. "All right," I said. “We'll wait, a while."

"I'm sorry, Richard it feels wrong, that's all. I do not like this,... this *intrusion.* I had thought we were free from interference from,... from the outside. I don't want things to be ordinary again,... I couldn't bear it."

"They're just bringing news," I said. "They'll tell Gruber what's happening, and then they'll leave."

"They could have tossed their news from the window or spoken it out of a megaphone. It costs money to land and take-off in one of those things, surely? Why would they want to land here? What do they want with La Maison?"

As we waited, the whine of the helicopter's engines faded into a long silence, as if the beast intended settling in for a while. Gabrielle sat stiffly, her ears pricked. We waited for a long time, the morning maturing, warming, the sound of insects buzzing. Then came voices, calling - calling her name. They were distant at first, but drew nearer. They were searching for us,... for her. She nodded, as if in understanding of something, then seized the moment, stood up, climbed upon the balustrade of the pavilion and kicked off her slippers.

"You have not seen me," she said.

She was going to dive into the lake!

"Wait,... Gabrielle, we should think about this,..."

She glared back. "You have *not* seen me," she repeated and then she was gone in a graceful dive. I looked over anxiously, not even sure the water was deep enough to swim, but she'd disappeared. When the ripples cleared I could just make out the shape of her body underwater, pulling away with strong, swift strokes. She was a good swimmer, swimming with all her might and I hadn't a hope of catching

up with her!

A short while later, I saw Gruber coming along the shoreline, struggling to keep pace with the uniformed man at his side. He waved when he saw me, and I waited for them to reach the pavilion.

"Mr. Graves. This Captain Schlesinger. He has come to evacuate the hotel - or as many of the guests who wish to leave."

"I see." I gave Schlesinger a nod, which he returned with a reassuring smile and a faint bow. Then he offered me his hand.

The shake of a man's hand is revealing in many ways, and on many levels; how hard to grip, when to relax; Schlesinger's hand was firm, military, indicative of a combative spirit, as one might have expected from a soldier, but I also sensed something unreliable in him. Out of politeness, I always judge the strength of a man's grip and try to match it to within three quarters. A reliable man, a man who might become a friend or an ally to me will sense that relaxation, and moderate his grip to match it. Schlesinger did not, but continued to dominate until I capitulated. Alas, he had already betrayed himself, and became at once a daemon for the projection of my own dislikes.

"We are looking for Mademoiselle Lafayette," he said, after briefly consulting the clipboard he had tucked under his arm. ”Her parents wish to evacuate, but are missing their daughter."

"I was talking with her last night," I said. Then I saw Gruber's eyes widen a fraction as if in alarm that I was about to be stupidly indiscreet. "However,... I've not seen her since then."

"She has not been this way?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Gabrielle's slippers were on the floor. Gruber had spotted them and motioned to them, secretly. Meanwhile Schlesinger consulted his watch "I have a tight schedule,” he said. "The parents must decide what to do. Stay or go with us." He seemed officious now, and abrasive. The long walk to the pavilion had been a waste of his precious time. While he and Gruber continued to discuss the situation, I pushed the slippers out of sight with my toe.

"I'm sure Mademoiselle Lafayette will be all right, Captain," said Gruber. "She is a grown woman, after all."

Schlesinger's eyes widened. I think he'd been under the impression he was searching for a child, which I imagine is exactly the impression Madame Lafayette had given him. He nodded, then turned to me: "You wish to come with us, Mr. Graves? We can take you to Zurich? It may be a week or more before we can pass this way again."

"I'm happy to stay, Captain. But can you tell me, how are things in the outside world?"

"Well, as you can imagine, there is great confusion. There are no flights as yet, but some trains are running - limited travel is therefore possible. You are English? I am sure the line is clear to Paris. From there I am not certain." He gave a helpless shrug. "To be honest, I think you are as well staying here for the time being. The location is,... impressively remote."

With that he gave me a salute, turned and headed briskly back to the hotel. Gruber lingered a while. "By remote, I think he means safe."

"Are things so bad?"

"We were listening to the World Service earlier. Smaller towns and villages remain peaceful - more self contained, I suppose. It's the cities that are the problem. All over Europe it's the same – reports of looting and the breakdown of law and order, running battles between ordinary people and policemen."

"Already? But it's only been a day. How can things have fallen apart so quickly?"

“Perhaps the potential has been there for a long time – something fundamentally fragile at the core of society,” he mused. “And this is simply the catalyst, the thing that has broken it.” He lowered his voice suddenly and leaned close. "Mademoiselle Lafayette?"

I gestured to the lake. "She's,... a very good swimmer."

He smiled and nodded. "Yes,... yes she always was. Perhaps you should fetch out a robe for her, and gather her slippers. She wasn't wearing much the last time I saw her, and the lake is cold."

“Herr Gruber,... do you trust Schlesinger?”

He thought for a moment. “What choice do we have?”

“Gabrielle,... she thinks there's more to this,... to their coming,...”

“I suspect she may be right. Schlesinger certainly knows more than he's saying, or than is being reported.”

“Oh?”

“His uniform,... it is not Swiss, and the machine bears no markings to indicate its origins.”

“But his accent,...”

“Oh,... Swiss, certainly,... but he is *not* from the Swiss army. Paramilitary, possibly?”

“Herr Gruber, this is the heart of Europe. Surely you're not saying we've already fallen victim to armed mercenaries being flown about in helicopters of no attributable origin?”

He laughed, but there was something forced about it. “Of course you're right. It sounds perfectly ridiculous.

“There's one more thing,” he went on. “The helicopter is also carrying civilians,... scientists. They've been taking measurements. I overheard them talking about energy levels and geomagnetic anomalies. I've tried to discuss it with them but they're evasive.”

“So they're not just scouting for people to evacuate?”

“It's clearly not a priority, or he would not have given up on finding Mademoiselle Lafayette so easily. I'd better catch up with him, see if he can be persuaded to let something slip.” He was about to go but then paused. “Thank you,” he said. “For wanting to stay,... for trusting in me. You must upgrade your room of course, now that so many are leaving.”

“Herr Gruber,... I”

“No, no,... I insist. I shall mention it to Monsieur Lagrange.”

I didn't see how it mattered now, the size of my room, but it seemed important to him, so I nodded and he strode away briskly in order to rejoin Schlesinger. I watched as they made their way back to the hotel, the captain pacing out all clipped and military, Gruber strolling after him with the quiet grace of a gentleman sage.

Energy levels and geomagnetic anomalies? It was beginning to sound apocalyptic, but nothing about the atmosphere that morning spoke of anything but beauty and tranquillity. I picked up the book and the memory stick, and with one last anxious look down the lake for a sign of Gabrielle, I set off to follow them. Her parents would be furious, perhaps even accusing me of kidnap or murder, now.

Chapter 15

The helicopter sat on the lawn like a giant hippopotamus, its undercarriage having made great depressions in the earth. Soldiers stood around, weapons still upon their hips, though I could see no need for the armed display. They were merely posturing then, but to what end? Then I saw a pair of the civilian scientist types whom Gruber had described. They were down by the water's edge with a wand-like instrument which one of them waved about while the other studied readings on a laptop.

So, some computers *had* survived! My heart leaped at the sight of it, and I wondered if the man might be amenable to reading the contents of my memory stick, just to see if it still worked. I was on the brink of approaching him, but something held me back. I'd promised Gabrielle! I could not use this man's machine to sneak a look at my past, or rather to see if it was still there, without betraying the magical pact she and I had made.

I have no real knowledge of military matters and did not recognise the uniforms of the soldiers, but they struck me as being somewhat casual and only vaguely soldierish: olive camo-trousers, khaki shirts and black armoured vests with bulging pockets. They spoke a range of languages: French, German,... some of them American; the scientists were English. Perhaps Gruber was right and these soldiers were not *actually* soldiers. They were security consultants or what, in less mealy-mouthed times, would have been called mercenaries. The national armies must have been at full stretch, I thought, and these people were plugging the gaps,... unless their mission was not strictly military,... but scientific.

The loading ramp was down and guests were already wheeling their suitcases into the machine. It did not look like it would be a comfortable ride – I saw only hard benches and webbing straps. Meanwhile the staff of La Maison stood smartly in a line, bidding each guest farewell, their uniforms pressed, their buttons gleaming, their aprons spotless and fluttering like little banners in the breeze. None of them were leaving.

I caught Bernadette's eye. "Don't you wish you were going too?" I asked her.

"Oh no, sir," she replied. "We are all agreed - we are better here. You are staying too, I hope?"

"Yes."

“And Mademoiselle Lafayette?” she asked.

“It seems she intends staying, yes.”

“I'm glad. This is good news, though her parents, sir,... they will be very angry, I think?”

“I'm sure they will,... but, Bernadette, have you no family?”

She shook her head. “Oh no sir, we are all the same here. All the staff. We are a little disconnected in that sense. La Maison is our home.”

“I see.”

Our conversation was drowned out by the whine of the engine as the helicopter made ready to leave. I'd not considered this before, having always assumed the staff had families, wives, husbands, like everyone else, in the nearby towns and villages. Did Gruber collect the disowned, the disaffected, the disconnected? It was not altogether a comforting thought, if only because I feared he might be intent on collecting me, perhaps also Gabrielle. We would become what? Permanent guests? Residents? I could think of worse places to be imprisoned, but neither of us could afford the tariff, surely?

The helicopter took to the air, sending out a tornado of wind. It circled to reveal the loading ramp, soldiers leaning out of it, gazing at us casually, their weapons still drawn. No,... I did not like to see the guns, and I was glad when the machine had gone. Nor did I envy its passengers the chaos into which they seemed bound. It was a form of cowardice on my part that I did not want to leave. It sounded dreadful, the sudden fall of everything we had taken for granted, and while I remained here, I could pretend that none of it was really happening, that it was all just a fantastic entertainment put on for us by Herr Gruber.

I saw Monsieur and Madame Lafayette. They stood upon the hotel steps, gazing up at the helicopter with what I can only describe as a desperate longing. They wished themselves on it all right, but had

been unable to leave Gabrielle behind. What did that tell me? Should I have been impressed that they had not abandoned their daughter. Or was her imprisonment their reason for being? Was it their purpose in life,... as mine it seemed was now her rescue? But how to rescue her? And into what, with the whole of Europe descended into chaos? If there was burning and looting in the cities, the roads would not be safe either!

I returned to my room, set the book and the carte mémoire upon the dresser and contemplated both of them. Why had I not asked the scientist to read it? It would have been a simple matter to see if, in a sense, my past were still accessible to me. The truth of the matter though was I had not wanted to know. I took the memory stick between my fingers and in a sudden swell of energy I snapped it clean in two. Then I opened the book to the first page, ran my fingertips over the texture of the paper, took a “Maison Du Lac” pencil from the bedside, and sat a while with it poised over the page, waiting for the words to come.

It was not that my mind was blank. Indeed it seethed with thoughts, but they were too many for now and I lacked the discrimination – or even the courage - to know which of those thoughts was worth a beginning. Indeed my only moments of clarity these days seemed to be those I spent with Gabrielle. She'd said last night I could not write a word unless she first permitted it. She had indeed become my muse. She was probably also very cold by now, and I should go to find her.

I set the pencil down, took a robe from the bathroom, then returned to the lake. She was not at the pavilion. This worried me, for I was sure she would have swum back there when she'd seen the helicopter leaving. I collected her slippers, which lay upon the rocks, where I had pushed them out of sight of Schlesinger, and I walked on, cradling them like puppies, and imagining them still warm from the press of her feet. Everything about Gabrielle aroused me, from the fertile sheen of her hair to the delicate perfection of her toes – all of it sexual, all of it intensely erotic.

The morning was warming up even though it was not yet 10:00 am. The sky was clear and of the best summer blue, but like yesterday, the distant mountains were blurred, as if viewed through frosted glass, and the air felt like it was thickening – not even the faintest breeze to make it bearable. I found myself longing once more for the cool of evening, to lie upon cool sheets in the shade of my room, with the curtains drifting in the breeze,... and with Gabrielle beside me.

Stop it, Richard! Think, man,... what's this all about? What's happening here? Geomagnetic anomalies? Energy? Gruber was probably right and last night's aurora had been the result of higher energy levels than usual - a flare from the sun - but what did that mean? It had been beautiful, but did it bode ill? What did Schlesinger know about it?

She was at the bay where we'd encountered each other yesterday. The perfect spot for a little private bathing, Lagrange had told me – and had then no doubt told Gruber, who had mentioned it to Gabrielle. It seemed obvious to me now that we'd been set up, but of course I no longer minded. She was sitting, mermaid like upon the rock that I had sat upon, when she'd discovered me, naked and embarrassed. She gave a start at my approach, then relaxed when she realised who it was.

“Ah,... Richard.”

“I brought you these.”

“Thank you. I was wondering how I could walk back in bare feet. You have rescued me, after all.”

“I've a feeling it'll take more than a pair of slippers to rescue you, Gabrielle.”

“I saw the helicopter leave.”

“Yes, it's taken a lot of the guests back to Zurich.”

Her eyes grew wide in hopeful expectation: “My parents?”

“No. I'm afraid they're waiting at the hotel.”

She gave a plaintive sigh. “Oh.”

“Did you really think they'd leave without you?”

“I'd hoped for it.” She shook her head in dejection. “So, they will be very angry now?”

“I imagine so. But if they've any sense they'll realise they're better off here. Safer, anyway.”

“Are things so bad?”

“There's talk of civil unrest in the cities – burning, looting.”

“So soon? But it's only been a day!”

“I know, I was surprised to hear it myself, but Gruber said something,... something about the potential for chaos having been there for a while. It just took something like this to bring it on. No sense in dwelling on it though. Let me walk you back.”

“Thank you. But *très lentement, s'il vous plait? V*ery slowly please, Richard? I am in no hurry to face them.”

She put the robe on and seemed to sink at once under its weight, her shoulders rounding, her stature diminishing at the thought of what might be facing her. But then she shook her head and said a definite “*Non!*” to herself, rose up again and set off proudly. As we walked I dreaded our return, feared her parents, feared the blustering censure of her father, perhaps even another insulting slap from her mother. I tried to put it from my mind.

“How well do you know Gruber?” I asked.

“Not well at all. You know how he is? Polite,... *très charmant*. But even when he appears to be personable, it is just an act. He is an hotelier, surely? And a very good one.”

“I was rather thinking he might be the same with you as he is with me.”

“And how is that?”

“On the surface friendly, personable, very charming, as you said. But also there's something quietly manipulative about him. It's as if he thinks he knows what's better for me than I know myself. Does he ever speak with you?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“He told you about the bay, yesterday, for swimming?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so.”

There came a rumble then, like thunder, like a dragon clearing its throat and the air seemed to shudder. The sound filled the sky and reverberated from the mountains. It was alien, unearthly, and it triggered our defensive instincts, so that we ducked a little and caught our breath.

“What are we doing, Gabrielle? The world's falling apart and we're behaving like teenagers, as if nothing else exists, as if nothing's happened here.”

“But I am happy for nothing else to exist,” she cried. “I have never felt more alive. I have no idea what these coming days will hold, Richard, but we must make them ours, for they will not come again. We must armour ourselves against the fickleness of the moment. *Oui*? We must *make* our moments from now on. Why should we wait any more?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean let's finish with all of this,... waiting. Let's *do* something!”

I thought for a moment, then felt my chest swelling with a sudden resolve. “Apparently my room is to be upgraded. I'll speak to Monsieur Lagrange and see if I can get a suite on the top floor, with a balcony overlooking the lake. You're right, Gabrielle. This is our time. Let's do something.”

“By taking a more luxurious room? This is not what I mean Richard. You should think bigger than this.”

“I am,...I mean I'd be honoured if you'd join me.”

She caught her breath. "For tea, perhaps?"

"No. You know what I mean. My bed is empty, so is yours. What more is there to say?"

The pavilion came into view, its copper dome strangely iridescent in the deepening light, reminding me of our tryst the night before, the unspoken promise and the unspoken price. “I know we have unfinished business,” she said, then nodded. “Get the best room you can, and I will come to you this afternoon.” She shrugged. “My

parents,... they will have a fit, you know,... but it will not be the first time."

The sky flashed. It was not like any lightning I've ever seen – more an impossibly vast net cast over the heavens. It was accompanied by a loud thrumming, like a roll of drums as the air parted and quivered. Gabrielle did not flinch this time, as if she'd already adapted. "I do not know what this is, Richard, but it is very beautiful. Let us make love today, and then die if we must."

"We can't *die*, Gabrielle. We'll drive away from here, together. We have to, otherwise how are are we to begin our story?"

"Our story? Ah,... but have you not thought that we are already living our story? We should not wait to begin something that has already begun. That is how others live their lives and achieve nothing."

Chapter 15

As strange as it might seem, with the whole of the western world apparently in chaos, and possibly even under martial law, life at La Maison continued as if nothing had happened; the staff went about their duties, their uniforms spotless, their expressions serene. The remaining guests were waited upon, the carpets vacuumed, the banisters dusted, linen washed and pressed, silver cleaned and laid out upon the table with military precision.

Gabrielle slipped up to her room, and I sought Lagrange in Reception. He was sitting behind his desk, his computer blank-screened, and for want of other distraction, he was sharpening *La Maison* pencils. He offered one to me with a quirky smile. I thanked him and added it to my growing collection. From the lounge I could hear the scratchy sounds of the BBC World Service coming from the valve radio, a handful of guests gathered round it for news.

Lagrange had posted translations of the main bulletins on the notice board, but apart from a few details of increasing unrest in the cities, there was nothing I did not already know. I found myself consulting instead the menu for that evening, and nodding in approval. Was it always like this at times of crisis? Did we fasten upon the slightest thing, the slightest hint of normality and order?

“Trout from the lake?” I said.

“Ah, yes,... and sautéed vegetables from our own garden.”

“Sounds delicious. How's the power holding up?”

“It is intermittent, Mr. Graves. But I think we are managing.”

“Good,... good. Em, Monsieur Lagrange, you know it's not like me to make a fuss, but I would like a room upgrade. Herr Gruber mentioned the possibility of it. Are there any,... suites?”

“Mr. Graves, but of course. The other guests, they are doing the same. And why not? Herr Gruber – he advises me that room rates and such are entirely irrelevant at the moment, while we are in a state of emergency. I have been holding the perfect room for you, in fact. It is our very best.“

“That was kind of you.”

“Not at all.” He rang a bell, and Anton appeared. He was asked to transfer my belongings, and before I could stop him, he had called Bernadette over, and instructed her to do the same for Mademoiselle Lafayette. I was about to protest, but he advised me that it was a suite with adjoining rooms, that Gabrielle's parents had upgraded themselves an hour ago, but had neglected to do the same for their daughter.

“I merely use my initiative to correct their oversight, Monsieur.”

He went on to assure me that only Herr Gruber had finer rooms that this. I didn't know what to think. I was warmed by Lagrange's solicitous manner, but also uncomfortable and not a little embarrassed by the fact that the entire staff of La Maison now seemed to be colluding in my seduction of the Lafayettes' daughter.

Within an hour I was taking tea on the terrace of my new suite, which overlooked the lake. They were fine rooms, spacious, comfortably furnished. Below, on the lawn, an elderly, leather-aproned gardener was already repairing the damage inflicted by the helicopter, carefully cutting out the turf and filling the depressions with soil. The overriding impression of La Maison, was one of endurance and an unshakable dignity.

From my elevated position, I could see more of the lake than from my earlier room. I could also plainly see the green dome of the pavilion rising in the distance. The suite was linked internally to Gabrielle's by French doors, which I had already opened wide, should she be in any doubt of my resolve. I would not be separated from her for a moment longer than was necessary. I awaited her arrival now with an increasing anxiety, in case she had changed her mind and now thought my plans presumptuous. Such is the way of all lovers, I reminded myself. It was a novel sensation because I'd been no one's lover for such a long time now.

While I waited I sat with the book open, contemplating the blank pages once more. She was right: I have always felt as if I was waiting for my life to begin at some future point. Meanwhile life passes, our mortal contract nears its expiry, and still we feel we have not yet begun to live. When I have finished school, we say, or university – then I will live,... or when my children are grown, or when I have retired from the factory, or the office – *then* I will live. It's a question of time, I suppose, or rather the perception of the time available for one's self.

I'm sure there were many who had woken up in old age to the realisation they were still waiting for something to begin that was already nearly over. With this in mind, I lowered the freshly sharpened pencil Lagrange had just given me to the page,... and began:

….*When a man is first attracted to a woman, it's not really the woman who draws him, more the recognition of something undiscovered within himself. And what I saw in myself when I looked at Gabrielle that first evening made me wonder, because I thought I'd done with all of that a long time ago. Indeed what I saw in her made me doubt I'd discovered even a fraction of the self I thought by then I knew....*

Did I really believe that? Yes,... yes I did, only now I knew it was not a dead thing, not just a twist of mortal biology, like a knot in a man's brain. It was alive, and knowing, and every bit as vital as a living being. Gabrielle was who she was of course, and I could never hope to really know her; the best we can do in our relations with others is respect their mystery, but in seeking to understand what they mean to *us,* we have no choice but to deal with the fantasies we weave about them, and with the daemons they stir in us.

Gabrielle,... Where was she? Dammit, it had been an hour now and still there was no sign of her!

There was a commotion outside. The De Luca girls were on the lawn, exclaiming and pointing to something. I followed their gaze to where a point of light seemed to be moving over the water. At first I assumed it was the helicopter returning, and my heart sank because I wanted no further interruptions or intrusions from the outside. I wanted to settle in and enjoy this peculiar sense of isolation, without a thought or care for how it ended, but it seemed we were to be disturbed by the outside world again.

I listened for the chop of the blades but there was no sound, and I realised then the light was in some way disembodied. It had a bluish colour to it, and it appeared to be drifting slowly like a wind-driven balloon, meandering, floating,... but not quite aimlessly.

Gruber came out onto the lawn. He stood, hands on hips watching the light and gradually I noticed a sternness about his countenance. The light worried him, and that it worried him worried me also. I went out to join him at once. By the time I reached the lawn the light had passed from view, and we stood anxiously, waiting to see if it would reappear, or if our senses had deceived us and it was not a real thing after all but

something imagined. There was a murmur of excitement, a feeling of something electric in the air.

“What did you make of it?” I asked him.

“I don't know,” he replied. “I've never seen anything like it before.”

“There was a sound earlier, like thunder, and a single flash of lightning.”

He shrugged. “I am at a loss, Mr Graves.”

“Is this what the scientists were looking for? Is this what Schlesinger had been keeping from us?”

He shook his head, uncertain. “Clearly, it is an,... an anomaly. We know the sun is highly active at the moment. Perhaps this is another manifestation of it. Ball lightning, perhaps?”

“Yes,... yes,... of course,... ball lightning. That must be it.”

The light reappeared, closer now, as if following the shore of the lake. There had been much strangeness in the past twenty four hours, but none of it had frightened me until now. This *thing*,... it looked so uncanny! And if it was ball-lightning, then surely it had the potential to do harm. We were no longer safe here.

“It seems intelligent,” I said, though I was keenly aware of how stupid that sounded.

“Yes,” he replied. “Or it may be that our own thoughts drive it,... that ours is the intelligence, and what we see are its effects upon the energy.”

This was even more bizarre. “Herr Gruber?”

“As I said, Mr Graves. I am at a loss. When faced with an anomaly, all explanations are equally valid.”

“But we must err on the side of the rational, surely?”

“It was you who said it appeared intelligent.”

“I know. Sorry. Could our presence be attracting it?”

“It's a possibility of course.”

“It's as if it's looking for something.”

I took comfort only from the fact that it seemed very slow and ponderous in its movements and I guessed that if the worst happened, and it drew too near, we could easily dodge it. It was about a hundred meters away now, still following the shoreline. It was quite painful to look at directly and, through half closed eyes, I fancied I could see a dynamic pattern upon it, a swirl of mainly blue and white shades, but accompanied by other rainbow colours, less vivid, like oil upon water.

“It seems reluctant to come over the land,” I said.

“Then we're fortunate. Or perhaps we disturb it.”

The light began to circle slowly, like a leaf caught in a swirl of air. We watched it with a mystified fascination. There had been a lot of stories of disembodied lights down the ages – ball lightning, earth lights, glowing orbs over cornfields - but they had always been elusive, never convincingly photographed, or filmed, always existing more in our collective imaginations than in reality, and decried as fake by the more rational among us. But this,... it seemed so brazen, so ridiculously obvious and oblivious of the number of witnesses who could testify to its existence. I thought of rushing back upstairs for my camera, but realised of course the camera had probably been fried like everything else.

It carried on, following the shore of the lake, eventually disappearing around a headland, and we sensed the moment of danger had passed. Gruber smiled and his sigh betrayed his relief. “Were I a religious man,” he said, “I would be expecting the end of days,... but I'm sure things will return to normal by and by.”

He turned then and I followed his gaze to where Gabrielle stood upon the balcony of my rooms. She was wearing a long, satin dressing gown, and when she saw me she gave me a single nod. It did not matter what we had just seen. We were set, and she was ready, and nothing could deflect us from our course.

I could read Gruber's mind in the tightening of the lines around his

eyes. “My dear Mr. Graves,” he said. “It seems your lady awaits.”

It mattered nothing to him that the world was on fire, nor that sparking fireballs were cruising the quiet waters of the lake. The important thing was that Gabrielle and I were exactly where he had intended us to be.

Chapter 16

She was sitting out on the balcony, reading the first lines of our story, when I returned to my room.

“I thought you'd changed your mind,” I said.

“Thought it, or feared it?”

“Both.”

“I was bathing,” she explained. “The lake is very nice to swim, but I did not want to smell of it. And then Bernadette came to help me move. She seemed very excited for me,... like a bridesmaid attending her bride to the groom's domain.”

“Yes,... It's probably my imagination, but I feel they've all been a step ahead of us.”

She gestured to the book. “You have begun to write?”

“Yes.”

“You were afraid of the light, just now?”

“It was unnerving. You saw it? Were you not afraid too?”

She gave a shrug. “There will be more strangeness to come, I think. Do not fear it, Richard. This is what we were made for, you and I.” She fixed me with her gaze, an eyebrow raised for emphasis. Then she gestured to the broken memory stick. “Is that it?”

“Yes. Not much to look at is it? You could probably fit ten thousand books on there, and destroy them with a twist of your fingers, or lose them down a crack in the floorboards.”

“You have made your sacrifice then?”

“It seems so.”

She glanced away,... “I'm sorry Richard. All that work.”

“Don't be sorry. Listen, there was a man earlier, from the helicopter; he had a computer. He could have read it for me, but I didn't want to ask him. It was as if a part of me knew, deep down, that my past had been poisoning me, and I was better off without it.”

She nodded but clearly felt the magnitude of what I'd done, felt herself responsible for it, even though I had agreed and was easily accepting of it. Still, I didn't like to think of her upsetting herself so I reached out my hand to comfort her. “Gabrielle,...”

My voice was drowned out by an urgent banging on the door. The sound was so insistent, so filled with anger and menace, I knew who it was before I opened it.

“Monsieur Lafayette.”

He did not wait to be invited in but pushed by me, close enough for me to smell the tobacco on him. Gabrielle was sitting serenely on the balcony in her robe, her hair tousled and looking,... well,... ravished.

“Ah,... Papa,... Can it not wait? Richard and I were just in the middle of something.”

The look in his eye told me he had already jumped to a conclusion regarding the nature of that “something”. He was not a big man, but we can all be fast and powerful when our dander is up and our victims are unsuspecting. He rounded on me with low punch. I saw stars, felt my lungs collapse and I sank to my knees, unable to draw breath. Gabrielle jumped up at once, but she couldn't come to me without stepping around him and she held back, as if afraid he would try to grab her.

I saw him holding out his hand, his fingers clenched, claw-like. “Come with me, Gabrielle.”

“It's too late for that, Papa,” she told him.

“Come with me,” he repeated, his voice hardening.

She did something curious then, and I was puzzled by it at first; she went out onto the balcony, stood on the chair and I realised she was

using it as a step up to the balcony rail. But the rail was barely eight inches wide. And there she was suddenly, quite calm, barefoot and balanced upon the rail, facing him. “I am with Richard now,” she said. “You will leave us alone.”

He took a step towards her.

“No, no, no,” she warned. “I *will* jump. You know I will.”

He hesitated.

“Just imagine the fuss it will cause,” she went on.

I looked at her, framed in the window, seemingly suspended in air and only a heartbeat from oblivion. “Gabrielle, please!” I tried to form the words, but the spasms from my diaphragm had robbed me of my power of speech.

He backed away a fraction, but she remained on the balcony rail, not trusting him. For a man whose daughter appeared to be making ready to leap to her death, he seemed unnaturally composed, indeed a stranger would have shown more compassion. Then he said he was going, that he would not interfere, but I felt there was subterfuge in his tone. Only a short time ago I'd seen him sacrifice his evacuation in order to remain with her and I'd felt a kind of admiration for such protectiveness. Now, however, there seemed once again something obsessively sinister about it.

“You know where we are,” he said to her. Then turning to me he said. “You are finished, Monsieur.”

His tone finally woke up what remained of my ego. I'd also found my voice again. “I'm not afraid of you,” I said, though of course in truth I didn't know if I should be afraid of him or not.

“Me? You have nothing to fear from me,” he said. “It is Gabrielle. She will destroy you. You think you know her. You think we discourage men because we are so small minded?”

“Well, yes, that's exactly what I think.”

“Pah!! You seemed a decent man. I would have spared you this, had you let me.” He gave me a curt little nod by way of parting salute.

”Good luck,” he said. “You will need it.”

When he'd gone, Gabrielle climbed down and came to me, taking my hands and helping me to a chair. Then she closed the door, and sat beside me quietly while I tried to control the remaining spasms in my diaphragm.

“What did you mean,” I said, “when you told him,... that he knew,... you would jump? How would he know,... you were not,... bluffing?”

“Because I was *not* bluffing, Richard. Truly. I have done it before. Clearly I was not meant to die on that occasion. Instead I broke my hip, my leg, my arm, and fractured my skull.” She parted her hair on her crown and leaned towards me. “I still have the scar. You want to see?”

This was a sobering news. “But,... why?”

She shrugged. “Have you never felt that way?”

“Despair? Emptiness? Of course, but I'd never,...”

“What? Kill yourself? I hope not. And neither will I, for now,... but Richard, if I ever change my mind, it will not be your fault. It will be because *I* have decided. *Tu connais*?” She smiled. “I told you I was dangerous. Are you happy still, to share a room with me? Do you want to search for sharp objects now, just in case?”

“Gabrielle, I,... want to reach you. I want to really,... touch you.”

She looked tenderly at me. “And you can. I will allow it, though I warn you the road to me is longer than you might have been thinking.”

“Maybe I can only make things worse for you.”

“Oh,... now he has doubts. And who can blame him?But do I seem troubled when I am with you?”

“Not now, but in time,...”

“When I tire of you, you mean? Or when you tire of me? You believe my father when he says I will destroy you? I have told you, he says these things because they are doubts in your own mind, and because you want to hear them. You cannot doubt me without also doubting

yourself, and if you doubt yourself you have nothing. *We* have nothing."

"You once told me I'd be unwise to trust you."

She laughed at the memory. "I did, didn't I? Poor Richard, his muse is so contrary."

She slid from her chair and knelt before me, knelt between my knees. Then her nimble fingers took each of the buttons of my shirt and slipped them open as surely as if she'd melted them, and as she worked, she said: "Listen, I don't know how long we have before we are disturbed again. But whenever it is, I hope by that time we shall be lovers. *Oui?*"

I held her fingers to my chest in order to still them, and I searched her eyes. Just how mad was she? Did I even care that she was mad? Surely in the moments we'd shared she seemed the wisest and most desirable of companions. But was that just another distortion I was projecting onto her? Was she, in reality, in herself, just *dangerously* mad?

She laid her hand flat, over my heart, and returned my gaze, her expression set, serious, determined. There were so many questions and in another place, another time they would have been everything to me, but here, now,... they were nothing. Whoever she was, whatever she was, she fitted so precisely into the pattern of my being, and at this time, in this place, for the first time in our lives,... we had a purpose.

The feel of Gabrielle's hand alone was sufficient to engorge my sex, so that I ached with an urgency I had not known since much younger days. She slipped her hand then through the folds of my shirt and touched her palm lightly to my skin. It sent a shock wave rippling through me, swelling me even more, so that I closed my eyes in a vain attempt to control myself.

Mindful of my erotic discomfort, but determined to push me beyond the point of no return, Gabrielle slid open my shirt, slid it back over my shoulders so that I quivered, my skin alive and sensitive even to the slightest brush of air. Then with both hands she stroked my chest, kissed my my neck, and I felt myself dissolving into a cloud of ecstasy. I felt her lips against mine, felt her hair brushing my shoulders, my chest, my face, its silken caress stilling my thoughts, stilling time. I parted my lips to invite her tongue but instead she caught my bottom

lip in her teeth and plucked it, painfully, so that I opened my eyes in surprise to see her brows arched in query, still waiting on my reply. "*Oui?*"

"Yes," I begged. "Yes,... yes."

"*Bien*." Business-like now, she tugged open my belt, flicked down the zip, her fingers moving smoothly and with great determination, the swell of my arousal willing itself towards her touch, hungry for air, to expose itself to her gaze, and to her caresses. Sex for me, even in my youth had always been a simple, functional business, quickly begun and quickly done,... but this,... I had never felt this way, not with any woman. We had hardly begun and yet already I was,... I was going to,...

"Woa!"

I stood up, breathless, before she could untangle the last bit of fabric and expose me. It was the only thing I could do to force a break, to calm myself – not because I did not want her, but because I feared to disappoint her by coming too quickly. Did I even have it in me to be man enough for this woman? I'd thought her inexperienced, but clearly she'd had many lovers.

"Richard?"

Had I offended her? "I'm sorry Gabrielle, I just needed to take a breath." I drew her up from her knees so she stood before me, then I slipped open her robe and slid it back over her shoulders. I was awed by her beauty, so I dared not breathe in case she melted away. She smiled, understood how close she'd brought me, was satisfied by the degree of my desire, and she let the robe drop to the carpet. Then, ever so gently she reached down and finished the release of my sex, being careful not to touch.

She smiled, raised an eyebrow and shimmied her hips a little: "So,... we shall go through to the bedroom now?"

She was so beautiful, every curve of her, and I feared to touch her so that as we lay upon the bed she had to take my hesitant hand and place it upon her sex, then curl my fingers round so they slipped into her folds, and I drew breath at how ready, how moist, how desirous she was. So we began and it seemed that no sooner I had touched

her, pressed my self into her and begun those first silken thrusts, I was shuddering out a release, but the hunger of this woman drove me to unexpected lengths until I was able to trigger one release after another in us both, and she lay trembling, her face transfixed, sated.

Dazed, stupefied, quivering with my own final climax, I fell across her, the pair of us slick with sweat, and I buried my face in the humid valley of her breasts, hot and heaving, where I fell into a dark place, and slept like I was dead. I remember thinking only that I did not care, that she could destroy me, and I would be happy. Let the road to her door be as long as it liked, I would travel it gratefully, and I would discover her in her dwelling place. And in discovering her there, I knew I would also be discovering myself. But is that not always the allure of the deadly woman? *The femme fatal?*

Chapter 17

I woke to the sound of the shower and moved groggily to find myself atop the bed, my sex, my loins, my legs smeared with the dried honey of Gabrielle, my sex already becoming alert in anticipation of another taste of her. I considered it, briefly, but dismissed it as insane; it would be days yet before I was sufficiently restored to enjoy this degree of passion again.

I slid to my feet, the room spinning as if I were drunk. It was dark, but for the light coming under the bathroom door and I wondered what time it was. How long had I slept? I fumbled for the light, for my watch: 3 am. We'd been a-bed for twelve hours, asleep for nine or ten.

I shuffled to the other en-suite, where I showered then changed into clean clothing and stepped out onto the balcony. The night was clear and warm, the velvet sky studded with the sparkle-dust of stars, the pale vapour of the milky way clearly visible. I felt a rare elation, a sense of myself floating away, of being rendered invisible to all hardship. In this twilight, interstitial world where I now existed, there could only be happiness born of the mystery of my life, and not misery, as I had always supposed.

This was more than a banal post-coital afterglow. Something significant had happened here. Our lives would never be the same again. The world had not ended. It had simply changed - dramatically so - but whatever its nature now, I felt she and I would be like kings and queens in it, rather than the cowering serfs we'd been before.

The hotel, the grounds; all were in darkness, not a light anywhere in a hundred square miles, and the world beyond was descended into chaos. It seemed unreal, and impossibly far away. Making love with Gabrielle had sealed the bargain, and I had the very real sense that this was my moment, my place. All I feared was a return to normality, for what good had I ever been in the ordinary world?

I turned at the sound of her footsteps to find her dressed in an oversized man's shirt. She was looking at me with that half-embarrassed, half hopeful morning-after expression. There was nothing to say. I was still breathless, possibly even in love with her. I opened my arms and she came, sinking into my embrace where we

remained lost to each other, until finally she whispered:

“You will still take me with you, when you leave?”

It was the only thing mattered to her.

“How can you doubt it? I will do anything, go anywhere with you. I will speak to your parents – surely they'll realise how serious this is for us. They will see I'm sincere. Perhaps one day I may even win them round.”

She placed her finger on my lips. “Hush. Don't think so far. Think no further than us leaving together, and the rest will follow.”

For now, I thought, here on this balcony beneath this dome of starry night, it was possible to imagine her parents no longer existed, so complete, so miraculous was our intimacy, but come morning of course, at the breakfast table, they would exist again. And then what?

She gathered a wrap about her shoulders, and sat serenely, her eyes fixed upon me with an expression of,... I don't know,... trust,... admiration,... and both of these things were terrifying to me, for how could I live up to them? I would take her with me, yes,... but in any relationship there comes a moment when we are no longer perfect, when our frailties show, and we say something, or we do something we do not mean. Gabrielle was not like other women, not so accepting of the imperfections of men and she would never forgive me for my inevitable failings. Or was this simply my own self-doubt speaking, trying even now to prize us apart?

Under her watchful gaze I took up the journal once more to write:

...only hint that all was not lost was her hair, which had the colour and the fertile sheen of a freshly opened chestnut. It would have been voluminous, I thought, except for now it was severely fastened up. Surely if there was any spirit left in Gabrielle, it had fled her body years ago,.... and resided now exclusively in those lovely chestnut tresses...

She smiled. “I trust you have since found sufficient spirit in my body to make you reconsider that last sentence?”

Eventually, we became aware of the darkness melting, pale shadows appearing on the lake and across the forest canopy. At first I was

disappointed that the dawn had come so soon, but a glance at my watch told me it was still too early for the dawn, and anyway the light was different. Was it another helicopter, then? Already I think we were both sufficiently attuned to the strangeness for us not to be surprised when we realised what it was.

She saw it first, her gaze fixed upon the middle distance where another glowing sphere of light was moving slowly along the shore-line. She pursed her lips, uncertain, then breathed out and drew the wrap more tightly about her.

I put down the pencil to watch.

“Are you all right?” I asked, my eyes transfixed by the sphere.

“Yes,” she said, and then, as the sphere drew ever closer: "Even if this means the end of the world, Richard, we should not be afraid."

"Why not?"

She took my hand. "Because we have found each other in time, and shall leave this world together."

It came as before, meandering, spiralling, like a simple creature, hesitant, uncertain, until it had settled in the bay opposite the hotel and illuminated the garden with a cool blue light, like lightning played in a flickering slow motion. In spite of Gabrielle's assurances, I was very much afraid of its strangeness, also mesmerised by what appeared to be swirling patterns of a metallic lustre upon its surface. It seemed to pick up on a current of, I don't know, air or energy, or lines of magnetic flux,... and it rode them, circling slowly in the bay.

“We should perhaps go inside and close the window?” I suggested.

“No. Even if it is death come to take us, we will look it in the eye. The world is different now and we will not be small here, like we were before.”

I could smell it - something metallic and burning - like an electric arc, and it sizzled like high voltage power cables. It made one final circuit of the bay, then settled upon something and its movement became more linear and purposeful. It crossed over the boundary of the shore and into the heart of the lawn, looming large, its top level with the balcony

on which we sat, and with a heart-stopping, window-rattling crack, it was gone and the darkness swallowed us once more.

Gabrielle flinched, her breast rising, her breaths coming in deep waves now, as if in contemplation of something dire. She was afraid, but determined not to show it.

Afterwards, we watched the dawn gather courage, so that the shapes of the land became visible and the mystery of things less opaque, less troubling to us. And when we heard the hotel coming to life at last on the floors below - the cheery tinkle of the breakfast glasses in the kitchen, and the cups and the saucers - we went downstairs.

I'd wanted to see if there was any trace of where the ball of energy had gone, so we went out onto the lawn. It was obvious; the gardener had left his fork stuck in the turf, where he'd been repairing the damage after the helicopter's visit. The wooden handle had been blown off to leave a stump of iron protruding. The top of it was splayed open in a star-like pattern, in which there nestled tiny sparkling spheroids of inter-metallic compound.

Gruber appeared then, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I heard something in the night,” he said. “I took it for thunder.”

“It was another ball of light.” I told him. “We watched it from the balcony. It was as if it ran to ground, like there was an,... an *affinity* between them.”

“An affinity?...”

“If we assume there's an electrical component to these things, then it seems reasonable to suppose it would be attracted to a conductor – like lightning perhaps?”

“Yes, but look at the damage Mr. Graves. A metal conductor will easily take a lightning strike, but this,... how much energy does it take to vaporise this amount of iron? It might easily have caused a fire if it had struck the hotel, to say nothing of what one of these things might do if it actually struck one of us.”

“We don't know that,” said Gabrielle.

“All the same, we'd be wise to avoid contact,” he replied. He nodded to

himself, still thinking. “We had some restoration work done a few weeks ago – the builders have still to collect their scaffolding.”

“You're thinking we could make use of it?” I asked.

“Yes. Metal poles sunk into the earth, like this fork here, spaced out along the lake shore. What do you think?”

“They should stop the things from reaching the hotel, run them directly to earth. A sensible precaution, Herr Gruber.”

“How many I wonder?”

“As many as we have. I'll lend a hand of course.”

Gruber stood and surveyed the lake front. “Paint them green so they blend in, perhaps?”

“Why not? There's no sense in spoiling the view, I suppose.”

Gabrielle said nothing, but I felt her unease,... something about our plans that troubled her, though they seemed reasonable to me. We did not know for sure what we were dealing with, and had only the evidence of our eyes this morning that the garden fork had prevented the light from reaching the hotel. But Gruber was right; we could take no risks. We were on our own out here and must take whatever measures we could to protect ourselves.

We were quiet at breakfast, Gabrielle caught up in a sleepy daze, hugging herself. Gruber stirred his tea in endless accompaniment to something he was contemplating. Meanwhile I watched the doors, fearful in case Gabrielle's parents should enter, though the presence of our host armoured me. Gabrielle caught my hand, knowing full well what I was thinking.

“They are late risers,” she assured me. “It is not even eight. We have a long time before they come down.”

I was not comforted. “We'll have to face them sooner or later,” I said.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head, but had no answer. Gruber listened and watched, but did not offer a solution, nor even a platitude, nor did he pause in the stirring of his tea. His mind was plainly and

firmly elsewhere.

Then she said: “You really think the metal poles are necessary, Herr Gruber?”

He nodded. “From what you witnessed last night, it seems the energy can be discharged before it reaches the buildings.”

“But it will put the pavilion out of bounds,” she said. “There are not enough poles, nor even if there were, there would not be time to lay them out so far as to protect the pavilion.”

He tipped his head in apology, charmed by Gabrielle's apparently irrational desire to keep the pavilion within bounds. “Surely it is only a small inconvenience,” he said. “And the immediate environs of the hotel are at any rate very comfortable. We had the indoor pool renovated only last month,... have you not seen it yet? I shall show it to you after breakfast. I know how fond you are of swimming.”

But Gabrielle was not to be so easily placated. “I would not like to be separated from the pavilion, Herr Gruber,” she persisted.

He sighed in defeat. “Of course not, and I do understand. It is a pretty spot. But I see no reason to curtail our freedoms. Whatever it is, this phenomenon seems slow enough for us to outmanoeuvre it – and anyway a few poles by the pavilion might be protection enough for anyone wishing to spend time there. We would just have to be alert when covering the distance between it and the hotel grounds.”

She nodded, satisfied, then looked pointedly at me. “My parents, they will not go there, Richard, if they think there is a risk.”

I understood her now. “But we can't hide from them all the time. It might be weeks before we can safely leave the hotel. Surely it would be better to make our peace with them?”

She bit her lip and looked directly to Gruber for support, as if only he could see what I could not. “Alas, you are a thief, Mr. Graves,” he said. “Worse, you are a murderer. You have taken their life. There can be no negotiation, no peace to be made. At least not yet. In the longer term, perhaps,... but definitely not yet.”

I sat back in exasperation. Both of them gave a nod, and neither was

smiling.

Chapter 18

There were hundreds of poles of aluminium, about six feet in length. The fork had been made of iron, but I supposed it was the electrical conductivity that was the important thing, the thing this phenomenon sought, and besides, we had no other option. I worked with Anton, and a younger, muscular lad, Heinrich, who the chef had spared from kitchen duties. We were also assisted by the elderly, and somewhat taciturn gardener, Gunther, who was less than pleased at what he saw as our assault upon his carefully tended grounds. He muttered curses under his breath. I didn't understand his language – something Teutonic - but I understood his meaning well enough from the knowing smiles and the raised eyebrows that Anton and Heinrich exchanged

Heinrich and I fetched the poles, balanced several at a time on our shoulders, him walking with the slow, deliberate gait of a hunter, while Anton and Gunther dug them in and set them upright in the earth, a long line of them, protruding five feet, and spaced at ten feet intervals along the lake front. The hotel was nestled in a gap in the otherwise unbroken tree-line and we supposed the forest itself would afford us some protection on our flanks. Behind us we had a line of foothills and then low mountains which we supposed would also act as a barrier to our rear, but we had no idea where these things were coming from, how they were formed, let alone what they were and I sensed that our activity was more of a comfort than anything, that we were at least taking some steps to protect ourselves, even if we did not know what we were protecting ourselves from nor if indeed we needed protecting in the first place.

While we worked Gabrielle sat upon the balcony, watching. Of her parents I saw no sign. She appeared deep in thought, though when she realised I'd caught her looking, she waved down to me, her expression grave, as if in contemplation of the perpetually dark cloud that blotted her horizons. I could tell she did not approve of our actions, that a mysterious instinct prevented her from welcoming them in the same way as the other guests who looked on. Our efforts were logical, rational, but in a world that was growing irrational, how much trust should we place in our rational senses? I shook my head clear. This was nonsense. Of course we were right to do what we could.

“We are finished, Mr. Graves,” said Anton. “It is a good job, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And now I must consult with Monsieur Lagrange regarding this evening's dinner.”

“Anton, may I ask, do you have family?”

He shrugged. “None that would own me, Mr. Graves. My life is here.”

“Do you never get away?”

“Of course, now and then. I take my holidays in Ibiza, but am always keen to return to La Maison.”

“Why?”

He shrugged as if it were obvious. “I am the head waiter here. No one can do it as well as me. I know because Herr Gruber tells me this is so. And anyway,... “ with a wide sweep of his arms, he gestured to the mountains and the lake, and the forest, “can you think of a better place to live and to work?”

He had a point, but still I was puzzled to think of anyone being so disconnected. I let him return to his duties, while I returned to my room, and to Gabrielle.

Being unused to manual work I was already aching from carrying the poles, so I sank myself at once into a deep bath. Gabrielle came and sat with me. She rubbed soap into my limbs and my back, her hands like silk. As I lay groaning with pleasure, I looked up through the steam to see this chestnut-haired beauty caressing me, and I felt I must surely have died and gone to heaven.

“Will you walk with me to the pavilion, afterwards Richard?”

“Yes,” I said, but there was something in her tone that troubled me: “Gabrielle, are you,... all right? What are you thinking?”

She shook her head a little and smiled. “Twice now you have asked me that. Please do not ask me again. I mean *never* ask me that, unless you really want to know, but be warned, I am from a dark place, and I do not think you will want to go there.”

“But I'll have to go there, eventually.”

“Oh?”

“I cannot simply acquaint myself with the brighter side of your nature, Gabrielle. I'm not that sort of man. I need to know your dark places as well, and understand them as best I can.”

She covered her eyes. “*Merde!* Richard. Think what you are asking!”

“*Je m'en fou*, Gabrielle,... I want to know all of you.”

“Oh? You curse very well in French, you know? All right, you have asked for it, but I suggest we proceed slowly.”

“Okay,... but Gabrielle?”

“Hmm?”

“The poles we erected this morning? You don't approve?”

She shook her head. “Don't ask me why. I can't explain it. I only think that we are missing something. Now,... tell me: do you still ache?”

“Yes,..”

“Your neck? Shall I massage some more. There is some oil here, I think.”

“Lower.”

“Lower? Ah,... yes,... all right, my love. Let me see what I can do about that.”

Chapter 19

We set out for the pavilion in the afternoon. I carried a bag containing towels, a snack of bread, cheese, and a complimentary bottle of wine that Lagrange had slipped in at the last minute - also the journal. Gabrielle had looped her arm through mine, and I could not help but feel like the richest man in the world as we set out, our steps already falling easily into the synchronisation of a lifetime's familiarity. And we had known each other what? A few days?

Suddenly she was dressing with great panache - an exotically embroidered blouse and a sporting pair of jodhpurs that showed off her peachy derrière – as if these things had lain in her luggage all the time, but only now in the absence of her parents had she thought to bring them out. Or was I simply looking at her through a different pair of eyes now?

It was warm and humid, a mist rising from the lake whose waters seemed oily and viscous, licking at the shingle shore with barely a sound. Gunther nodded a greeting as we passed him. There came the sharp smell of paint and turpentine as he painted the poles a dark green, and with what seemed a grim determination they should not be allowed to spoil the gardens he laboured in. Was he, too, like Anton, and the others? A fixture of this place, with no discernible life beyond it?

“I know they are a sensible precaution,” said Gabrielle, her voice a whisper, yet seeming loud in the silence. "Still, I do not like them. I do not like,... to be fenced in.”

“I'm sure we'll barely notice them in time.”

“You will not let them limit you though? You will not view this place beyond their reach as being,... dangerous? I don't want to live in fear. If the lights are part of things now, then we should try to understand them more.”

I reassured her I'd no intentions of allowing myself to be limited by our strange circumstances, but in truth I couldn't help feeling exposed now, as we picked up the lake path. I didn't understand the phenomenon,

but had already equated it to a kind of lightning, and I didn't want to be struck by it because I'd seen what it had done to Gunther's garden fork, and surely that would be the end of me, but I also understood her warning, that we should not take too much care. If we did, we fell into a trap and limited ourselves in other ways, important ways; we armoured ourselves against a risk that might not exist. And that too was the plot of many a small life passed in needless fear.

“You will write some more of our story this afternoon?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And swim with me?”

“Of course.”

“I like to swim,” she said, simply. She gathered herself closer and her seriousness melted for a moment into a tender smile. “You see, I am not so dangerous as yesterday? Your company is a healing balm, Richard. You are the light that chases away my darkness.”

When the pavilion rose into view I was struck, as always, by its beauty, but I could not help wishing I'd brought a pole with me, to sink into the earth nearby, just in case we had need of its protection. However, I hid my anxiety from Gabrielle. Perhaps she thought of it too, but cared little. I remembered again the chilling image of her balanced upon the balcony rail, certain death, three storeys below, and a look of calm resignation on her face. How could she have appeared so willing to embrace it? It was like that with the lights. I suddenly had an image of her standing out upon the lawn, a light drifting towards her, and she facing it, arms outstretched in sacrificial abandon,... and then it taking her, consuming her, snuffing her out with nothing more than a wisp of vapour to bear witness to her passing. Was it insanity to trust so meekly in death's embrace that way, or was it courage? I gave an involuntary shudder as I shook the image away.

“Richard?”

“It's nothing,... look we're here.”

We sat a while upon the cushions, the long drapes of the Pavilion hanging lifelessly in the still air. She lounged back against the rail, her head flopped upon her shoulder, her fingers drooping sleepily.

“What are you thinking,” she asked me.

And with a reproachful smile I said: “You must never ask me that, unless you really want to know, but you should be warned that like you I am also from a dark place.”

She nodded. “*Touché*. I know that place.”

“Actually, I was thinking I cannot be the right man for you.” I lied. I was thinking no such thing. Indeed I was already hoping there could be no other man for Gabrielle, but me.

“Oh? Now he tells me, after he has had his way with me.”

“I watched you dance with Gruber. You sparkled. You came alive.”

She gave a shrug, her expression defiantly morose. “Such things,... they are,... trivial.”

“No, it lifted you up. I couldn't have done that. I was afraid to touch you. When we're together, we settle in that dark, heavy place, that serious place. How can it be healthy?”

“Ah,... *oui,... vraiment. La lourdeur,...* Very much, a heaviness, Richard. You feel it too? I had not thought I'd find it in another. Yet you would run from it? Escape from it in, what? In dance? *Oui, peut etre.* Perhaps, for a while it is good to dance, but sooner or later the music will stop,... and then what?”

I caught a hint of movement by the lake, and turned to see a figure, dressed in khakis, with a hunting cap and a rifle over his shoulder. A solider? He was settling inconspicuously among a cluster of rocks, the rifle beside him. He was what? Waiting? I flinched in alarm, but Gabrielle barely lifted her lids.

“Gruber sends someone to watch over us,” she said.

“What? Who?”

“The young one,... Heinrich. Will a gun be of any use, do you think? I mean against the lights.”

“I imagine a bullet would pass clean through. There seems to be no

substance to them."

She nodded. "But what else can he think he is protecting us from?" And then, brightening in a most unconvincing manner, she said: "We shall swim now, yes?" Without waiting for an answer, she stood and began unbuttoning her blouse. We'd brought no costumes, and this wouldn't have been a problem except now we had a watcher.

I hesitated. "What about Heinrich?" I said, jerking my head back to his quiet figure in the shadow of the rocks.

"You think he would like to swim too?"

"No, I was only thinking,... well, *you know*. He's watching us."

She'd removed her top, her breasts proudly jutting, and was now slipping her jodhpurs down. "You are worried that,... what?... it might fire him up, the sight of me, *sans vêtements*? Maybe so. I hope it does, for then it might also make him do something about his crush on Bernadette."

"Heinrich and Bernadette? I'd no idea."

"Well, there you are. You notice these things when you are looking out from that dark place, weighed down with such heaviness."

She stepped onto the rail and launched herself over. I undressed awkwardly, self-consciously, and lowered myself more gingerly into the water. I ventured out only a little way at first, testing the depth with my toes and finally coming to rest at a point where I could feel the bottom dropping away. I'd lost sight of Gabrielle but then she bobbed up, ten meters further out where my imagination insisted the water was very deep indeed. She was treading with a languid serenity while she waited for me to cross the void towards her. I was unused to swimming beyond my depth, but I fancied I'd been out of my depth since the moment I'd set eyes upon her, and that I'd better get used to it. I took a breath, then swam out, thinking that if she was such a good swimmer, she might rescue me if I got into difficulty. I had to trust her, you see?

She raised her eyebrows as I came up to her. The water was cold and I'd begun to shiver, but she didn't seem to mind it. "Is this too much for you, Richard? So far out?"

“I'll be all right.” But I feared to stop swimming, feared to relax and tread water in case I bobbed under, swallowed a lungful and lost my nerve. And there were unknown depths beneath me!

“You would like to swim back, closer to the shore?” she asked.

I shook my head and forced myself to begin treading. I would *no*t sink. I had done this a thousand times before – all be it only a few strokes from the safety of the shallows. It was just the unknown that made me fearful.

She rose up, then doubled over as she made a dive. I saw only her legs as she went under, and I knew I could not follow. The dark waters of the lake were obviously her natural element. Playfully, she bobbed up again behind me, then she laughed, but seeing the fear in me her eyes softened. “You can make it to the point?” she asked, tipping her chin to a jutting outcrop, across the bay.

I nodded.

“Come. We will take our time. I am with you all the way.”

She kept pace with me, pulling an easy back-stroke so she could keep an eye on me, while I struggled with an untidy crawl. Whenever I looked at her she was smiling encouragement, and though I had never crossed waters so deep, so cold and over such a distance before, I felt protected.

“Heinrich cannot see us here,” she said, as we eventually waded out onto large, flat rocks. They were warm underfoot, having been baked in the sun, and laying down upon them was bliss. “It will take him twenty minutes to walk here,” she added. “I am not so liberal I would like him to watch.”

“Watch?”

“Richard, you owe me. I was so attentive to you earlier, and what did you do afterwards?”

“I,... fell asleep on the bed?”

“*Exactement.* But I will forgive you, depending on how well you can return the favour.”

Her eyes were large, drinking me in as she lay there, still dripping from our swim, the languor of her body already a metaphor of love, of sensual pleasures the like of which I had not believed possible. How could this last? Pleasure like this,... it was only for the dreaming of it. It was never truly attainable. Not for long anyway.

By the time Heinrich had made it to the bay, we'd already swum back to the pavilion and were drying ourselves. We dressed, and Gabrielle settled down upon the cushions to doze a while. “Very well,” she murmured, “I forgive you.” Then I opened the journal to write, after reviewing the opening paragraphs,...

Gabrielle had the look of a child that night, and she was so quiet, so undemonstrative in her mannerisms, she went unnoticed between her more animated parents. She was pale, perhaps even a little sickly, dressed in an unflattering blouse, and an unfashionable skirt that would have better suited her mother.

Was it even possible that such a transformation could have been wrought in so short a time? I wrote a while longer, breaking off for periods of contemplation while I watched her dozing. Meanwhile Heinrich picked his way over the stones along the lake-path and I waved to him in greeting. He nodded, smiled, then settled once more a little way from us. He looked weary and hot, also a little cross. I felt his reproach and took pity on him, stirred Gabrielle into wakefulness by the caress of my hand upon her hair, and suggested we returned to La Maison.

We were emerging from the shade of the forest, where it swept down from the hills to the lake shore, when we came upon Gunther, still doggedly painting the poles we had planted that morning. His hands, his arms, his face were now smeared, commando fashion, with streaks of green. Heinrich was close behind. There was something taciturn about Gunther, perhaps not quite surly, but the stillness in his gaze when he looked at you was always unsettling. You found yourself inventing a past for him, and it was never a pleasant one. When he eyed us that afternoon however, we didn't have time to wonder what he meant by it because it wasn't long before his gaze was sliding beyond us, and then his brow furrowed and his eyes widened a fraction, which in Gunther I read as terror.

I turned to see a light meandering over the lake. It was still far away but following the same line that had been taken by all the others. My heart leaped at the sight of it and I guessed we would soon be testing

our defences. Gabrielle was fascinated, unable to tear her eyes away. I took her arm but she remained rooted.

“No, let us not run away from it, Richard.”

“All right, we won't run. But we shall walk. Let's make our dignified way and stand on the lawn behind the poles, just in case. Please.”

She nodded her reluctant assent, and we joined Gruber who was just then speaking with Signor De Luca, and his girls. Seeing the light they broke off to stare down the lake.

“You sent Heinrich to guard us?” I enquired.

He nodded. “You think it was unnecessary?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Only if it is other men we need protecting from, Herr Gruber.”

The light was approaching the bay now, and I saw Heinrich bring the rifle to his shoulder as if he meant to take a pot-shot at it. He was young, the rifle a powerful one – capable of dropping a stag at immense distance. It was understandable he would want to try, I suppose, but something made me fearful, and then I saw the look on Gabrielle's face,... a look of horror.

“We should stop him,” I said.

Gruber didn't understand my fear, and was alarmed more by my tone, which he informs me is usually other worldly but on this occasion had hardened into an irrational but utterly convincing alarm. He was ready to call out when Heinrich fired. There was a deafening report, and I think the lad caught the light full square. What happened next, none of us was prepared for.

It was as if the bullet had left a path, a thin disturbance in the air, like a thread linking the light to the gun. There was a discharge, like lightning, or like the blast from a science-fiction ray-gun. Even before the report had had time to echo from the mountains, I saw the barrel of the rifle vaporised, and Heinrich thrown back to land upon the grass, arms and legs outstretched, where he lay quivering and smouldering.

We ran to him, Gabrielle being the first to reach him. His clothes were

in rags, and the soles of his boots had been blown off. I felt sure he would have been burned, but instead he just lay there white with shock, bruised from his flight over the lawn but, otherwise, miraculously unmarked. Gabrielle dropped beside him, and laid her ear to his chest.

“He is breathing,” she said. “Heinrich, can you hear me?”

Gunther came up, holding the remains of the gun, his expression grim. There was a sulphurous stench, and only the wooden stock intact, with just a few twists of metal attached, stellated as before. It seemed it was not only futile to shoot at the lights, but also dangerous.

Carmen and Natalie and Bernadette came running up together. Bernadette's expression was wild with fear. “Did you see it? Did you see it, Herr Gruber? It attacked!”

Gruber shook his head, bewildered. He'd seen it. We all had,... but what *had* we seen? Gabrielle looked to me for an explanation. “Richard?”

I shook my head, at a loss. “I,... I,.. don't think it attacked,... No,... It was as if the shot attracted the discharge in some way, that's all. If we leave the lights alone, they will not harm us. It's a natural phenomenon, like lightning. And like lightning, we must learn how to avoid it. We must not shoot at the lights,... just as we should not fly kites in stormy weather.”

Carmen hugged herself. “But it was so frightening,...” she shook her head and swallowed back tears. Bernadette stooped to support Heinrich, who was by now recovered enough to sit up. “I'm all right,” he said, breathlessly, his eyes speaking of a deep shock and confusion. “I,... I'm all right. I'm sorry I shot at the light, Herr Gruber.”

“Never mind. You are safe now,” said Gabrielle. “You are with us,....”

“But,... I thought we were swimming, Mademoiselle.”

“That was earlier, Heinrich. You are confused. Rest a while. It will all come back to you.”

“No,... you and I,...”

She smiled indulgently. “You were dreaming perhaps?”

Then her expression darkened, as her father came out onto the steps, and she froze in her tender administrations to the youth.

Gruber saw him too and sighed wearily. “I don't know which I fear most, Mademoiselle,” he said. “The uncertainty of our predicament, or the wrath of your father.”

She looked pointedly at him. “You knew what you were doing when you engineered a liaison between Richard and I.”

He gave her a thin smile. “Do you complain of it, Mademoiselle?”

She blushed and lowered her eyes. “You know I do not.”

He made his way to where Monsieur Lafayette was standing, but his charm was insufficient to melt the scowl that came back at him. “I'm sure there's nothing to fear, Monsieur,” he soothed.

“You see?” said Lafayette, ignoring Gruber and addressing Gabrielle loudly, across the gathered crowd. “You see the danger we are in now? Had we left yesterday we would have none of this. We would be safe at home by now.”

I kept my distance, because I knew only too well how much I brought the worst out in him, and I trusted he had the good manners not to attempt to strike a more senior gentleman like Gruber. At first Gabrielle too, made no attempt to stand up to him. Indeed she seemed cowed, guilty perhaps that indeed her parents had stayed because of her and were now in some danger on account of it. But then I heard it coming, a cat -ike growl that began in her throat, gathering strength until she spat back at him: “Then if the helicopter returns. I suggest you get on it AND LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!”

The force of it was something to behold, the equal surely of the lightning strike we'd just witnessed. That she'd never spoken to her father this way before was evident in his shocked expression, but he recovered quickly. “Pah, you are always the same. When a man comes along, you speak of independence. But when he is gone, remember there will be nothing for you – nothing! And you will remember then everything we have done to protect you!”

Gabrielle lowered her eyes, her hair closing over her face, a curtain to hide the hurt. Bernadette felt the shock of it, and laid a hand instinctively upon Gabrielle's back. Gabrielle flinched, but then read the sympathy in it, and allowed the hand to linger a while. They shared a glance, then Gabrielle sought my arm, and we walked away.

“Don't let him undermine you,” I said, as we climbed the stairs.

“But everything he says is true. Why do you think I stay with them? I am thirty two years old! Other women have a family and a career by now. And where am I? I am nowhere. I am nothing.”

“You are not nowhere. And you are *definitely* not nothing.”

“But *who* am I?”

“Who are any of us? Rich or poor, we are all nothing. Except to ourselves and to those who love or have loved us. Then we are everything.”

“That is very poetic. And clearly you try hard my love, but you are unconvincing. I am something, *oui*: I am a coward. I stay with my parents because I cannot be alone. I need always someone to keep me from being too much inside of myself. And when someone comes along who I think I can be with instead of them, I leap at the chance. It gives me courage to stand up, to pretend I am strong. But my needs,... they are overwhelming. I drain others,.... and then they leave. So always I return, a coward, head bowed. Then my father smiles, my mother preens – both of them triumphant at another victory over my self esteem.”

We entered our rooms and she sat down upon the couch, her head in her hands, her body shaking with great gulping sobs. “I'm sorry Richard. This is more what I am like beneath the surface, and it is not pretty. It is not poetry. I am all smudged mascara,... like a Goth queen. I am like fucking Halloween!”

I took a deep breath. Being with Gabrielle was like a cycle of drunkenness followed by rapid sobering. “You're not wearing mascara. Halloween is months away, and you are forgetting, this is our time.”

She sighed, her sobbing steadier now, and she looked aside. “Yes. Our time. And when it is over, you will leave me.”

“No.”

“*Mais oui,...*” she reached out and stroked my face. “If I were you, I would leave me too. Go, before it's too late.”

“Don't talk that way,” I said. “Let's go to bed,...”

She gave a quick little smile, which she quickly reeled back in case I saw too much of her pleasure in it. “Very well,” she said. “But when you know every inch of my body and it tires you, and my moods tire you,... then you will leave me.”

“I wasn't thinking of sex. Just lie with me. Come.”

So we lay together, the curtains of the room billowing in a rare movement of air, a refreshing balm after the heat of the day. And I held her, the both of us laid back upon the pillows, lost in the silence of our thoughts, until she dozed off. To be with her like that was somehow more potent, more powerful than sex. With sex there is an expectation, a function to perform, and yes, there must be trust, but what could be more trusting for a woman to roll her forehead against a man's chest, and drift off to sleep?

“I will not let you down, Gabrielle,” I promised, as I combed out her hair with my fingers. She did not hear me, but whimpered softly at the onset of her dreams, and curled into me more closely. I waited until I was sure she was asleep, then eased her gently to the pillow, took the journal out onto the balcony and settled down to write some more.

...I'm *not sure what I'm trying to say, Herr Gruber. Only perhaps that I no longer take part in the petty intrigues of life. I prefer the insides of my own head for company these days. To release a woman like Gabrielle would be a serious undertaking, and a grave responsibility for a man. I am not that man. I came here to work, to arrive at a conclusion to whatever it is I am wrestling with inside head – and definitely not to flirt with shy girls who have no hope of ever growing up...*

And I wondered what kind of fool could have said such a thing, what kind of idiot could have been blind to the possibility that such a woman might fill him this way? I could no longer envision a time when I would be without her. It was suddenly unthinkable. I cared nothing for anything that had gone before in my life, beyond the mountains, least

of all a million wasted words, words that could come nowhere near to describing how Gabrielle made me feel at that moment. Truly the world could end tomorrow, and indeed was showing every signs of doing so, but Gabrielle was right; it did not matter, because we had found each other, in time.

The remains of the memory stick were still upon the table and I looked at them in dazed disbelief: twisted shards of plastic, a broken circuit card – the memory chip hanging from it. My former life was there, but already it seemed so old, so insignificant, so irrelevant that I swept the pieces into my cupped palm and tossed them contemptuously into the bin.

So much of reality was slipping away, I had no idea even what day it was. I counted them on my fingers to make sure: I'd been here what - just four days, and Gabrielle, a stranger, was now everything to me. Should I berate myself for being a gullible fool, or thank God such miracles were still possible?

I heard her stirring, heard her footsteps as she sought me out, finally to lean sleepily against the door frame, doe eyed and smiling. “*qu'est ce tu fais, Richard*?”

“Hmm? Oh, I was,... writing a little,... also thinking.”

“So,... I see you are still here. You have not left me yet.”

“I'm still here, yes.”

“And your story progresses?”

“*Our* story,” I corrected her. “And yes, it progresses. Would you like to read it?”

She shook her head. “Later perhaps. But your thoughts, what do they tell you?”

I paused, not wanting to take away her smile, because she smiled so infrequently. “My thoughts,... they tell me you are the world to me,.. also that I *must* speak with your father.”

It was as if the air had gone from her. “But why?”

“*Because* you are the world to me.”

She moaned: “This is how it begins Richard. There have been others, you know? And they are all serious, until they speak to my father,... and then,...” she shook her head. “They will turn you away from me. They will tell you things you will not want to hear, and some of them will be true, and then you will begin to doubt what it is you feel for me, because I will have become someone else in your mind.” She came to me, sank to her knees and took my hands, gripped them desperately. “What you feel now is untainted by any other knowledge of me, of my past. Why risk knowing more? I beg you not to do it.”

“I won't listen to anything they say about you. It would all be lies to me. Only what you tell me yourself will I accept as the truth,... even if you lie to me. Do you understand? This is the bargain we make as lovers.”

She hugged herself. “I feel,... so trapped here suddenly. I cannot escape. How can I explain my only hope is to disappear, to flee a hundred miles, a thousand, ten thousand.”

I couldn't bear seeing her like this, so I pulled her to me and promised I would not speak to her father, that I would put it from my mind, but this was no longer good enough. She needed more.

“Take me with you, Richard.”

“I will, you *know* I will. I promised.”

“No, I mean right now. Your car will run, you said?”

“Yes,... but,... it's not safe to travel. I live in England,... there's a thousand miles of uncertainty between here and there, to say nothing of twenty miles of water, and no idea if the boats are running, or if we can get petrol along the way.”

She was at a loss, and shook her head, then smiled, as she came gradually to her senses. “You will really take me to England?”

“It's a start. You could find your feet there.”

“With you?”

“Of course, if it's what you want.”

“Then this is more than a holiday romance for you?”

“You know it is.”

She nodded. “Yes,... I know. I'm sorry,... you will grow weary of this,... this testing of you. But for now I thank you, Richard.”

There came a knock at the door, polite, enquiring. Definitely not Gabrielle's father.

“Ah,... Bernadette,” I said. “How is Heinrich?”

“He is well. Thank you, sir.”

“He gave us a fright.”

“Yes,... Em,... Herr Gruber asks,... will you and Mademoiselle be joining us for dinner?”

“We will, thank you.”

She curtseyed, but was forgetting this was a game between us, neglected to wink, and I knew something was wrong.

“Bernadette?”

“We,... we will be all right, sir, won't we?”

“How can you doubt it?” I smiled, as I imagined Gruber would do, though I'd no idea if we would live or die, nor how many more days we could continue this pretence of normality. It also worried me that even Gruber had failed to rally the confidence of his staff, or at least of Bernadette. The incident on the lawn had shaken her terribly. She nodded, and seemed a little more reassured, though what she saw in me that would convince her I do not know, because it was purely wishful thinking on my part.

When she'd gone, Gabrielle asked: “Are you not afraid my parents will be at dinner?”

“They won't be there. I made an arrangement with Lagrange. If your parents called to take dinner in their rooms, he'd send Bernadette as a signal. Otherwise I'm to assume they'll be there, and we must do

whatever we feel is best: face them, or dine alone up here. Tonight then, we shall at least dine in style, and in peace."

She raised her eyebrows. "Impressive," she said. "Such subterfuge is worthy of Gruber himself!"

"I take that as a compliment, I think."

Chapter 20

It was an appealing notion: to run. Might we not have muddled through after all, the two of us, on the road? Before dinner, Gabrielle and I sought my vehicle on the car-park at the rear of the hotel. It was an MGB, a small two seater sport's roadster of considerable vintage, and, I'm afraid, dubious reliability. It was where I'd left it on Saturday night, my ears by then ringing with the roar of its tyres after the three day journey from England, which had included one puncture, and a snapped fan-belt along the way.

It looked dusty and neglected, streaked with tar and bugs, and did not inspire much confidence in me now. To cross such a distance may be looked upon as an adventure when there is the infrastructure of civilisation to support you, but all of that was gone now. Another puncture, another snapped fan-belt and we would be walking across a continent that was apparently traumatised and unpredictable.

Gabrielle ran a finger through the dust on the bonnet. “You came all the way from from England,... in this?” Clearly it inspired little confidence in her.

“Yes.”

“Will it start, do you think?”

I sank behind the wheel, keys in hand, hesitating to try in case it would not, but it caught at the first touch, the engine purring into life, the dials flicking over, indicating volts and oil-pressure – all normal. It was ironic that its antiquity, a thing that had been of growing concern to me for years had been the one thing that had saved it and rendered it still useful to us. However, there was only fuel for a fraction of the journey back, enough to the French border perhaps. We would have to fill up on the way. But were the fuel stations even manned? Surely not. It was another reason we could not risk it without knowing more.

“*Qu'est-ce que tu pense, Richard?* You think what? It is still a bad idea?”

I turned the engine off. “Let's give it a few more days. The Helicopter may return. Schlesinger may have better news next time.”

She nodded, resigned to the common sense of it, but like me enchanted by the romance of simply jumping into the car and taking our chances on the road. “Very well,” she said “Let us go and eat like the pampered bourgeoisie we are.”

We joined Gruber at his table. He stood politely and bowed formally to Gabrielle, then to me, and we sat down to consult the menu on which, again, there was only the one choice.

“You object to rabbit? Mr. Graves,” he enquired.

“On the contrary, I'm grateful for anything under the circumstances.”

“That's very noble of you. By the way, was that your car I heard earlier?”

“Yes.”

He leaned closer so he could whisper, and then with a glance at Gabrielle, he said. “You're thinking of checking out?”

“We've,.... considered it.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “You're wise to keep your options open, of course,... however,..”

“You think the risk too great for now? We agree.”

He thought some more and seemed equally torn between two options, neither of them appealing to him. “I have a revolver you can borrow” he said.

“That's very kind of you,” I replied, a little surprised, “but I wouldn't like to be caught anywhere in Europe with a revolver in my pocket.”

“Ordinarily I would agree with you,” he said, “but under the present circumstances I would not like to be caught without one.”

“I'd be as like to shoot myself with it by accident,” I joked.

I was uncomfortable at the thought of guns. Unlike in other parts of the world, where any bloody fool can familiarise himself with a handgun, in England they are alien, unless you are a policeman, or a criminal.

Even my Inspector Grantley thought them barbaric.

Afterwards, Gabrielle and I settled in the lounge, while Gruber returned to his rooms. The power had been steady for most of the day, lulling us almost into a state of normality. La Maison had indeed become a lone island of calm in a sea of chaos. The radio was picking up the BBC World Service as usual, and we listened, in the company of other guests, all of us quiet, all of us trying to picture the world beyond the mountains, trying to piece it together from snatched commentaries warbling in through the static: cities littered with useless cars; black smoke curling from the shattered windows of looted shops in the rougher districts; streets deserted by the fearful innocents and left to increasing numbers of posturing, gun toting gangsters – the majority of them barely out of their teens.

Was it really as bad as that? Or did we make things worse in our imaginations? Was the reality that for the vast majority of the Continent things were returning to normal, decent people mucking in to get things going again? Why, amid periods of uncertainty, did we think of violence, guns, and of self preservation? Was it only the massive deterrent of a patrician state that prevented us from dissolving into such barbarism? Or could we manage without it and still remain decent, peaceful,... human? No,... surely anarchy was only possible in a dream like world where no one died, and no one could be hurt or threatened by others intent on seizing or retaining power.

Listening to the radio that evening I was not encouraged by what I heard. Nor was I immune to the temptation of ensuring my own survival at any costs. So it was that, when I stepped out onto the lawn for air and a rest from the blackness of the news service, and Gruber handed me the cigar box, and I opened it, curious, to see nestling inside the revolver and a handful of 0.38 rounds, I did not protest. I merely nodded, grim faced, and accepted it as a sensible precaution, if not for my own preservation, I told myself, then for Gabrielle's.

“You'll put it on my bill?” I enquired, joking.

Gruber raised his eyebrows as if to say he did not think it was funny. “Have you ever used one?” he asked.

“No. My days in Ireland,.. I was a little young for the Paramilitaries, but I'm sure I'll get the hang.”

“Hopefully you won't need to. Perhaps the mere possession of it will

dissuade,.... calamity."

"Is that not the fatal delusion of all weapons?"

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Herr Gruber,... can I ask,... why?"

"Why, Mr Graves?"

"I'm not talking about this," I gestured to the box. "I mean,... do you befriend all your guests this way?"

He smiled with his eyes, his mouth managing to remain curiously impassive. "I think you know I do not."

"It's just that,... forgive me,... but I cannot help thinking you knew I was coming here – just as you seem to know more about my life than is normal for even the most professional hotelier."

He drew a long breath as if to armour himself against analysis. "Naturally I knew you were coming. Your reservation was made months ago and I always make it my business to know who will be coming. I have a long memory, Mr. Graves, and there are certain guests, you see, for whom I prefer La Maison to have no vacancies."

"Like the Lafayette's?"

"Ah,... touché. But I permit the parents only in the company of their daughter."

"Yes,... Gabrielle,... Forgive me, Herr Gruber, but there's something strange here, something contrived."

"Are you suggesting I conspired to 'interest' you in Mademoiselle Lafayette, long before either of you arrived?"

"I think that's exactly what I'm saying, yes."

He waved his hand dismissively, as if it were perfectly obvious. "Well, of course I did. If you remember, you received an email from Monsieur Lagrange telling you the week you originally requested for your stay was unavailable, and would an alternative week be acceptable – this

week in fact?”

“Ah,... yes. So,... the Lafayette's had already confirmed their reservations for this week, and you conspired to have us both here at the same time?”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Graves. I could not help myself. I've watched her for years, as I've also watched you, and I knew there would be an extraordinary chemistry between you.”

“Well,.. you weren't wrong there.”

“But there's more to it. Your departure from the pragmatic production of detective fiction, to this,... this tickling of your unconscious depths with the keys of your sadly defunct laptop, Mr. Graves,... it is admirable. It is the age old path to self discovery, it is,... a spiritual quest, though you still couch it in the terminology of a rather dry psychology, if you don't mind my saying so. Also, the way you have been seeking it,.... in all of those words,.. it is impossible. I think you know that. No matter how you rearrange your words, no matter what combinations or permutations you try, there is no solution, yet paradoxically no way of knowing if there is *not* a solution, so you waste your life in trying one thing after the other. This is what I have read in your eyes, Mr. Graves. As for Mademoiselle Lafayette,...” he shook his head again though this time in dismay that I could not see it. “What she seeks is very simple, and is easily attainable.” He went on: “As for what you seek, have you considered that you are looking for it in the wrong place? You look inside of yourself so deeply, yet you speak of your daemons as if they were not real. You have offended them and now they demand your recognition. They have leaped the boundaries in order to manifest themselves in the real world.”

“You mean they've become the projections I put onto you and Gabrielle? My muse and my wise old man? Why do you persist with this? You are *real* people, Herr Gruber. To project one's archetypes out into the world is a delusion. One must withdraw the projections – that is the lesson of psychoanalysis.”

He smiled sympathetically. “To believe one can find the answer to his life in isolation from the rest of humanity,... this,... this is also a delusion. You must connect with others, even those you cannot bring yourself to love. But you must do it,... and it is through your soul, through Gabrielle that you shall achieve it.”

I lay the box upon a table and sat down heavily. Gruber had touched upon the very thing. He'd turned a key and made it obvious - the shortcomings of my life, my nature. It was not that I had not realised any of this before, only that I had been hiding from it. Still, there was nothing to be done. It was in my nature to shun all close relationships. Those Parisian psychoanalysts would have had a field day with me - called me schizoid possibly, or at best an unrepentant and irreconcilable misanthrope. As for women,... yes, I could venture close to them on occasion, create a flimsy façade that would serve me until I had had my way with them. But that was no longer possible, not with someone like Gabrielle.

He sat beside me, lit up a cigar, and savoured the taste of it for a while, maintaining only a companionable silence, until the dusk deepened, and squirrels came to gambol upon the lawn. Then, speaking quietly, almost to himself, he said: “To have lived one's life, and not given all for love, I mean without thought or care for the consequences,... that, my friend, is never to have have really lived or loved. You know this. This is the oldest lesson. It is what all the poets teach us.”

“You don't need to say any more. In four days my life has changed. From giving nothing of myself,... for decades,... I have given myself completely but,...”

He turned, caught upon the hook of my doubts. “My boy,... you can admit such a thing, and then say there is a 'but'?”

“Gabrielle and I,...” I sank my head into my hands. “Our story! Herr Gruber. I do not see how it can ever end well. There is tragedy in it. I feel it coming, I feel it in my bones. She deserves happiness, and I see none, beyond what we have now. As soon as we drive out of those gates and away from this place, we're lost.”

He sighed. It was the sound of one who was satisfied his point of view had finally been recognised. “Mr. Graves, the point of love, as in life, is not how it ends, but in how it is lived. The finest of lives may be short lived and cut down cruelly, yet they might be considered all the finer for that. Your John Keats for example, a poet much loved, yet a man who died while considering himself to be a failure, a man who died barely out of his boyhood,... and his is surely one of the finest of lives ever lived?”

“I'm familiar with the life-story of John Keats, Herr Gruber, and your

quoting it as an example does not inspire much confidence."

"Ha! Have courage my friend. Also patience. There is no need to rush into taking your chances on the road. You are my guests. Think of La Maison as your home, for as long you both need it. We are remote here,... hidden away,... and apart from these mysterious lights,.. quite safe, I'm sure."

Gabrielle came to us then, her tall figure sheathed in a long white cotton frock, so she appeared ghostly and floating, until she came within the sphere of amber projected from the lamp, upon the table. Then she gathered a wrap about her shoulders and sank beside me, pouting theatrically.

"La Maison is becoming morose, Herr Gruber," she complained. "It suits me well, because such is my nature, but for others not so, I think."

Gruber laughed,... "We should hold another dance, perhaps?" he suggested.

Her eyes flickered with interest. "I think it would raise the spirits," she replied, calling his bluff. Then, speculatively, she lifted the corner of the cigar box on the table, raised an eyebrow at the contents, and closed it gently. "Clearly we're all in need of cheering up. Richard and I were only saying this afternoon how we settle most easily into a dark place. We are used to it and it does us no more harm than has been done to us already,... but the others,... it is not good for them. We do not want them following us into madness."

He nodded. "I will speak with Monsieur Lagrange. Tomorrow we shall have a buffet dinner, rearrange the dining room a little. We are smaller in number now and could comfortably hold the dance in there. "

"It sounds perfect, Herr Gruber. You are very kind – the perfect host."

"It's gracious of you to say so, Mademoiselle. But it is really my pleasure. And you are not distressed by developments, I hope?"

She shrugged. "I am done making myself a prisoner for anything." She turned to me. "Will we be swimming at the pavilion in the morning, Richard?"

“Of course, if it pleases you, Gabrielle,” I said. “But why not later this evening? The moon is up. There is light enough, I think, unless you are tired.”

She smiled, then turned back to Gruber. “Can I ask you not to send anyone to watch over us this time?”

“As you wish,” he grinned. “It would be unfair of me to impose upon Heinrich anyway. He's very young you know, and I think he found his duties this morning somewhat unsettling.”

“Naturally. He must be badly shaken.”

“Yes,... though not entirely on account of the incident with the ball of light. He speaks of a very elaborate fantasy he had whilst momentarily unconscious.”

“Ah,...” she blushed. “He told you. I'm sure he will get over it.”

“I'm sure he hopes he never will. ”

We heard glasses tinkling as Bernadette brought them on a tray. Gruber had ordered brandy. With a nervous glance into the thickening darkness over the lake, she set them down. She was wondering, as we all were, when the next light would come.

“We are to have another dance, Bernadette,” Gruber told her. “Tomorrow evening. Will you join us?”

She brightened. “You spoil us, Herr Gruber. Yes, it will be wonderful.”

“Good, good,... it's settled then. Spread the word among the others. I shall expect you all there, bedecked in your most exotic finery.” And when Bernadette had gone, Gruber turned to me. “You see how Mademoiselle Lafayette commands us, Mr. Graves? Even one so demure as she has only to speak and she can bend the gods themselves to her will.”

Gabrielle laughed and not for the first time I envied Gruber the skill with which he could so easily puncture her languor. At a stroke, he had made her light and playful. “You flatter me,” she said. “You also humour me. I'm sure I am quite powerless in the world. It has always been so.”

“Ah, but here at la Maison, Mademoiselle, you are Queen of all you see.”

“And you Herr Gruber, are very charming, and also, once more I think, a little drunk.”

“Ah, yes! You see Mr. Graves? How perceptive! It is true: a little too much wine, but I speak the truth none-the-less. It is to be hoped normality is restored soon or my cellars will be dry in a matter of days.” He lifted his glass and swirled the amber liquid, savouring the scent of it. “To what shall we drink?” he asked. “To health, perhaps?”

“To life?” I suggested.

Gabrielle thought a moment, sank back into her languor, then lifted her glass. “To death,” she said.

Gruber and I exchanged a glance, then saluted her, and drank with uncertain enthusiasm to death.

Chapter 21

I returned to our rooms in order to deposit the revolver, thinking I would have no use for it at the pavilion, and that I was less likely to shoot myself by accident the further away it was from my person. I'm not sure why I accepted the damned thing from Gruber in the first place. It had possessed a fleeting allure at the time, sufficient for me to be seduced by it, but now I'd sobered a little and wished I could be rid of it. But it seemed impolite to insist he took it back straight away. In the morning, I thought,... I'd give it back to him in the morning,.. tell him I'd slept on it, and since we'd no intentions of leaving La Maison now, the gun was of no use to us.

It was as I climbed the stairs I saw Bernadette sitting on the steps, half way between landings, her chin in her hands, deeply contemplative. She gave a start as I approached and made to get up.

“I'm sorry, sir,” she said. “I don't know what I was thinking.”

I waved her back down. “Don't be silly,... is everything all right?”

She looked at me, perhaps wondering if it were appropriate she should be talking to me at all, and then she sighed. “I'm afraid,” she said.

I sat beside her. “You can't be,” I said, simply. “You are one of Herr Gruber's staff. It is your smile that comforts the rest of us.”

“Then my smile is slipping a little.”

“Things will be all right,... you'll see.”

“May I ask what is in the box?”

“I think you know,... and all right, that's not good, is it? But,... things will still be all right. Herr Gruber will not let anything bad happen to La Maison. It is the safest place to be. He will protect us all.”

She gave a nod, as if I'd half convinced her. Then she took my arm and pressed it. “You will not leave us, sir? I mean you and Mademoiselle Lafayette? Even if all the other guests have gone? You will still be here?”

“We plan to stay for as long as things remain unsettled. But,... why do you ask?”

“We need you,” she said. “You and Mademoiselle.”

“But surely your lives will be so much easier when we've gone – no one else to think about but yourselves.”

“You don't understand, sir. Without guests, we have no purpose. And we need purpose more than anything at the moment. Without it we are lost.”

It sounded strange to hear her talk this way. I tried to distract her. “Is Heinrich all right? Gruber tells me he's still a little unsettled after the incident this afternoon.”

She looked away and shook her head, then tried to swallow back the emotion.

“Bernadette?”

“He's very upset, sir.”

“What is it?”

“He told me,...” she hesitated, blushing, then gathered herself with a deep breath. “He said that when the light struck him, he fell unconscious. To us watching him, I know it seemed only like a moment, but he is convinced he blacked out for hours,... and that,... well,... he had a very vivid dream.”

“Yes,... he said something to Gabrielle about it. About swimming with her?”

“I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have told you.”

Heinrich's imagination had clearly been fired up by Gabrielle that afternoon. It was understandable.

“But it was just a dream.”

“That's what I told him. But,... have you never had a dream where it was so real you could not tell the difference between it and reality?”

“Such things are rare, but possible, yes. I've had a few dreams like that. They're called Lucid dreams – there have been studies,... they're perfectly normal.”

“Oh, sir,... he is so embarrassed. He dare not look Mademoiselle in the eye. Please, if you see him and he appears strange,... nervous,... you will understand. She must not be offended.”

“Of course,... but we can hardly be held responsible for our dreams. Please tell him I said so.”

“Oh no, I'd rather he did not know we'd spoken. I didn't know what to do, whether to speak with you or not, or even how to explain,...”

“It's all right, really.”

It was not unknown for people struck by lightning to hallucinate, to believe themselves removed to another reality, sometimes grotesque and frightening, sometimes serene, so that they were reluctant to wake up. In scientific terms the theory is that the energy discharge stimulates a region of the brain called the pineal gland. In more mystical language the Pineal is known as the third eye, that when it opens we become aware of a different kind of reality – a place of shamanistic vision, a place we can enter and journey through, and what we see there tends to be influenced by our expectations, or by our fears. Certain mystics tell us it is the afterlife, that at the point of death our sense of time collapses so that we in fact never die, relative to our own selves - only to those we have shared life with are we apparently lost to this thing called death. So, Heinrich's afterlife was a lake, and swimming, with an older, beautiful woman, but not with Bernadette? Still,... I was pleased for him.

She wasn't telling me everything of course - just enough to explain any strangeness I might notice about Heinrich at our next meeting. I took this to mean he'd done more than swim in his dream. You think perhaps I should have been angry, or jealous, but really I understood the nature of dreams well enough not to take them at face value,... that the daemons we meet in dreams are rarely what, or rather whom, they appear to be. Gabrielle's form was the one his soul-daemon had chosen, that's all. It had lured him away, lured him into the dark waters of the lake to swim.

“Bernadette,... may I ask,... where did Herr Gruber find you?”

“Find me, sir? Oh,... I was working in an hotel on the island of Ibiza.”

“He has friends on Ibiza?”

Her hands had begun to tremble a little. She saw that I'd noticed and made an effort to steady them by hugging her self. “I'm sorry sir, I don't like to be reminded of that time. Herr Gruber,... he owns property there. La Maison is not his only interest.”

“Really? He must be fantastically wealthy.”

“Yes. He is also our last hope,... you must trust him, sir.”

She left me then, skipping down the stairs, rather more cheerful than when I'd found her. I didn't understand her parting words, but paid little heed to them anyway because I was anxious to return to Gabrielle.

Chapter 22

After collecting the journal and some towels, I rejoined her by the lake shore where she waited, gazing into the blackness. The night was warm, though now a faint movement of air had begun taking the stickiness out of it. A bright moon had risen from behind the mountains, its face blurred by an oddly shifting haze, but affording sufficient light to pick our way.

At the pavilion, I lit the lamp, set it upon the balustrade, and we sat down together in its warm sphere, to contemplate the lake. If we were trapped at La Maison, I could think of no finer place to end my days. Then I thought back to the rather bleak toast we'd drunk earlier, felt ill of it suddenly, and gave an involuntary shudder.

“Richard?”

“Hmm? Oh,.. I was just thinking that I am not ready to die yet.”

She smiled mysteriously. “Ah. *Bien*. It is as well, because I am not finished with you yet.”

I could just make out the thin uprights of a number of poles that had been placed there since that morning, by the shore, but I made no comment on them. I knew Gabrielle was sensitive about them, about interfering or guarding ourselves against the changes that had befallen us and I had not wanted any careless words of mine to spoil the growing magic of the night. If she saw them, she made no mention of them either.

As we settled into each other upon the cushions, she asked me if I would read her some of my story, then asked what I would write next. So I set pencil to paper, and after a moment in which to gather my thoughts, I wrote:

If you don't believe in the soul you'll have difficulty accepting anything else I am about to tell you. How happy a man is in life, how genuinely mature and contented he is, is revealed by analysis of his dreams and in particular dreams of his relations with the women he encounters. This is how his soul speaks to him. These are the murmurs of their conversation, the fireside chats between a man and his soul. Immature

women, imprisoned women, imperilled women are indications that all is not well,...

“How dramatic,” she mused. “You *must* finish it, Richard. It is leading us somewhere, I think.”

I wondered what she would say when I wrote that Heinrich had dreamed of making love to her in such vivid detail he was as embarrassed now as if they'd fallen drunk into bed. But if it was to be *our* story, then there could be no omissions. Was it possible to even be with someone that way? Was it possible to be so completely open that they knew your every thought, and you theirs? How do you like my dress, Richard? I could hear her asking me, and I could feel myself, tired, irritable, and thinking that I did not like it, that it was unflattering, but not wanting to hurt her feelings. The dress is lovely, I would say. And she would know I did not mean it, and turn away from me sulkily.

No,... Gabrielle and I could not be that way, and I could only hope she would know better than to ask. But the writer is always in full possession of the geography of his own dark places, while he can only guess at those of his heroine. How could it ever be truly *our* story then? It could be ours only so long as she continued to approve of it.

“Richard, you seem tired tonight,... drifting off into space. Would you rather we went back to the hotel?”

“No,... I want to swim. Really.”

“But there are pools. Herr Gruber showed me the indoor one this morning and it is lovely,...”

“Does it have stars?”

“No,... no stars. But there is an outdoor pool as well.”

“I'm sure both pools are very nice, but they lack,... infinity. I think I'd prefer to swim in the lake. The lake absorbs me. I could never outswim it.”

“I understand. Oh, Richard,... what a beautiful night!”

The forests lay black on either side of us, and the water rippled silver under the moon. There was no aurora tonight, just stars and the hazy

sweep of the milky way; a clear night then, and silent except for the call of owls and the fluttering rustle of bats.

She moved away and when I looked at her she was already removing her clothes. She did not dive into the water as before, but picked her way over the rocks with an elven grace and stood a moment in profound nudity before the moon, then lowered herself with a sigh into the liquid blackness. She was impossibly, heart-achingly beautiful. But where did that feeling come from? Was it not merely regret that what I sought in her I could never truly possess? That this moment, this night, this vision of her would never come again? Thus, can beauty never be truly appreciated without also a sense of its impending loss?

From where she entered the water there now radiated rings of silver, and they spread out into the lake like the probing of a radar, investigating the strangeness that surrounded us, and Gabrielle, with her dreamy breaststroke, at their epicentre, her languorously circling arms, dictating the rate of its pulsations.

“Am I so imperilled?” she called out.

“Imperilled? I don't know,” I replied. “Imprisoned, perhaps is a better word.”

“Then rescue me, and save yourself.”

“I *am* rescuing you,” I said.

I undressed, left my clothing mixed up on the floor of the pavilion with hers, then slipped cautiously into the lake. It felt warm now, even though it was fed with melt water from snowy mountains, so how could it be warm? It could be warm because this was La Maison, and that season it seemed anything was possible.

There came not a sound above lapping of our limbs. The moon painted the landscape around us in shades of silver, black and midnight blue, and the only sure point of reference in it all was the lamp I'd left burning on the balustrade of the pavilion - a small winking light, sometimes amber, sometimes yellow.

As before, Gabrielle was the braver, daring to swim further out into the unknown depths of night and black water, while I kept within an easy number of strokes from the shallows. I felt cowardly, and challenged by

her. It made me wonder if she would always be just a few strokes out of reach, or if she would one day teach me to cast off all caution, and finally, truly live.

I think she'd hoped another of the mysterious lights would come, while I'd hoped one would not. Gabrielle won, naturally, though I was not exactly surprised. I became aware of its presence from the pale outfall of its luminance upon the canopy of the distant forest, far across the lake. Then the light itself rounded the point and began its familiar meanderings over the water.

I muttered an oath: "*Merde!*" and turned for the shore at once, but Gabrielle stayed put, treading water, watching its approach with a supernaturally detached calm. "It is true what I've heard then?" she mused. "Shit really does sound better in French? At least you seem to prefer it, my love."

"Gabrielle,... this is no time for jokes. We must go."

"But perhaps we are safer in the water." She sounded not in the least concerned.

"Better not to take the risk though, eh? Come, quickly."

There was now a singing in the air, a high pitched whine. It was coming from several directions at once and I pinpointed it as emanating from the poles. Whether this was a sign of their affinity, or their increasing potential with respect to the polarity of the charged sphere, I do not know, but the sphere seemed to become aware of them. It suspended its meanderings and made a more direct course for the pavilion, and for us.

There was a tremendous energy in it. Whatever the nature of it, I could feel the hairs on my arms and my head rising as it neared us. I was at a loss. If I swam for the shore, I would be hauling myself out just as it struck, but if it struck me in the water, if the shock did not kill me, then I would surely black out and drown instead!

I was swimming towards Gabrielle, when it came over our heads, I'd not been so close to one before. Its surface was painfully bright to look at, but also incredibly beautiful with iridescent swirls of rainbow colour, and that peculiar scent, like a burnt out motor - sharp, crackling and potently electric. I glanced back to see the pavilion lit up in stark relief

against the blackness of the forest beyond. Then it struck one of the poles. There was an almighty crack as it touched down, followed by a chest-crushing explosion as the top half of the pole was vaporised. Then there came a river of blue sparks, like a network of tiny fingers fanning out from the base of the pole, spreading across the land, then the water. I felt a rush of air, and jolt. I remember convulsing, and the next thing I knew,....

Chapter 23

I was sitting at Gruber's table, watching Bernadette and Heinrich dancing a Viennese waltz. Heinrich was dressed in tails and a bow-tie. His hair was slicked back and he wore a fixed smile, like a competition dancer. Bernadette leaned out into the spins, her hip pressed against his for stability, the swish and rustle of her sequinned dress conveying the fun and the energy they shared upon the floor. The scene was polished, theatrical, dramatically lit, and incredibly vivid,... too vivid for any of it to be real of course and I knew at once that I was dreaming, or hallucinating, and yet fully conscious of myself within it.

“They are a lovely couple, are they not, Mr Graves?”

Gruber sat beside me, a pale suit as always, this time topped off with a white Fedora hat with a black band. As he spoke I grew ever more aware of the strangeness, the unreality, that I was sitting with him, apparently conversing, but at the same time swimming in the lake, and had been struck by an energy that had done I know not what, other than apparently opened my third eye, through which I found to my surprise I could see perfectly well.

The irony was not lost on me. I'd been musing over Heinrich's fate that day, and congratulating myself on not sharing it. Now here I was, my third eye jolted rudely awake and taking in at once an astonishing vision. I pinched myself but I don't recall if I felt any pain, only the warmth and the apparent solidity of my flesh. I was aware of the dream, of my self, and carried with me memories of my former reality. In short, I was perfectly lucid. I could even smell things – a faint perfume, polish, wine,...

“Astonishing!” I said.

“I wouldn't go so far as to say astonishing. I've suspected it for a while. It's surprising perhaps but,..”

“No,... Herr Gruber,... forgive me, I mean this is most unusual.”

“Oh?”

It was not Gruber of course, not really, not literally. It was a figment of my dream, my imagination come to life. It was an archetype as Jung would have said, a daemon. In this place, this dream place, he was a shape-shifter. He was not, you understand, *actually* Gruber.

“Never mind,” I said, thinking I'd enjoy the experience while I could. It was better than being aware of drowning. I prayed only that Gabrielle had escaped the same fate, that she would be able to rescue me, hold my head above water while I came round. If not, then we were both done for. Was she here too? But such a thing was impossible. To share a reality was one thing, to share an hallucination was quite another.

“Gabrielle? Where's Gabrielle?”

“Mr. Graves,... are you all right? You seem,... anxious. Mademoiselle Lafayette retired to your rooms only a few moments ago.”

Then she *was* here! No,... I thought, get a grip Richard - this is *not* reality. Even if you met Gabrielle in it, it would not really be her! Remember, reality is something you share with other souls. This,... this is no more than a dream, and everyone you meet in it is no more than a projection from within your own mind. I shook my head clear, thinking I could only trust that she was all right, that she'd survived the light – she'd been further away from it than me. I was also thinking I had to learn as much as I could from this extraordinary experience before it faded and I woke up.

“I'm sorry, Herr Gruber – I'm getting confused. Heinrich and Bernadette, you say?”

“Yes. I'm always afraid when liaisons develop between members of my staff. The results are so unpredictable. And if a relationship goes wrong, one of the parties always feels it necessary to leave. It's tiresome of course, for they must be replaced,... though not just with anyone. It's not as if I advertise my positions, you see?”

“Perhaps it won't go wrong though.”

“But they are both so young. Bernadette is barely nineteen you know?”

“Really? I,... I'm hopeless with women's ages, but I'd thought her a little older, surely?”

“She was sixteen when I met her. She'd run away from home and was waitressing in a dreadful little place.” He was clearly disturbed by the memory. “She was not being well treated,...”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because she interests you, Mr. Graves. I've seen the way you play together, and it's very charming.”

“I assure you my playing with Bernadette is entirely innocent.”

“Of course, my dear fellow; I don't doubt it. Tell me, have you children?”

“No, but if I had they'd be of Bernadette's age,... so you see,...”

“Neither have I,” he cut in. “Therefore I indulge my paternal instincts in other ways. My staff, for example, they would each have a story to tell; despair, loneliness, rejection, even violence,... both received, and inflicted on others. But that some people are ill suited to the world, well,... is it their fault, or is it the world for being incapable of making room for them them? We are all born in innocence. We do not ask for life. The least we should expect is to be happy while we are here. Do you not agree?”

“The world is how we have made it Herr Gruber. And we must all try to fit in as best we can.”

“Must we? What if the world is an abomination? See how she smiles, Mr Graves? How well she dances? I will not describe to you the state I found her in. It would break your heart.”

“You found her? But where?”

“Oh,... she'd washed up on a beach in Ibiza. Her world had collapsed, and she was very unhappy. So, I brought her to the Casa, where she was my guest for a while. Then she decided she could not leave, that she would rather be of the Casa Del Mar, than *not* of it.”

“Then,... you create another world for them, for your staff?”

“Hardly another world, but my house, such as it is, is at least an effective sanctuary. Were they to re enter the world beyond it, I've no

doubt they would be unhappy again, ill adjusted,... misanthropic. Here, I've created a purpose for them, you see? I have created meaning."

"Ah,... Bernadette and I were talking of this, earlier. Their purpose is serving others?"

"And why not? All the spiritual traditions teach us the importance of selfless service to others. It tempers the ego,... opens the doorway between soul and spirit."

"Then we,... the guests of La Maison,... we are your meaning?"

He smiled. "Not quite. Do you think Monsieur Lagrange sees meaning in the tantrums of Madame Lafayette? No,... he finds meaning in his ability to deal with her, while studying and eventually liberating his own self. He treats her insults impersonally, and finds it within himself to see her as a human being, to rise above himself in a way,... and in return, to love her,..."

"Love Madame Lafayette?" It sounded impossible and I almost laughed.

"You think meaning is a key, perhaps?" he asked. "Or a string of words?" He shrugged. "No, my friend, it is a state of being. And that state is triggered by the realisation of something."

"The realisation of what?"

He leaned back, spreading his palms upon the table-top, like a man concealing his cards. "I cannot tell you. You must discover it for yourself." He turned his gaze once more to Bernadette. "What is it about her that draws your eye? Have you never wondered?"

There seemed to be something dangerous in this and I had to remind myself that it was an hallucination, and that all the figures in it were projections. They were daemons, not real, though my conversation with this daemon had seemed plausible enough. I would wake up eventually, though, I thought, and for now it was all right to go along with what I saw and heard and felt here, for none of it affected my reality. Yet this feeling I was getting now, it disturbed me deeply, and I wanted him to leave off from where I thought he might be leading me.

"Herr Gruber,... please. Bernadette does not draw my eye. She is a

lovely young woman, but,.."

"She is yours." he said.

"Mine? You can't just *give* a person away. You say you look after these people, give them sanctuary and meaning, and that's very noble of you, but you do not own them."

"You misunderstand," he said. "It is Bernadette who has given herself to you. That's why she is yours. It is to you she looks for comfort, for understanding, for meaning. It used to be me, but she has transferred her affections. She sees something in you, Mr. Graves. If I were to send her to you, you would take care of her wouldn't you? You're right of course, we cannot own people, but we can nurture them, and in doing so, we become attached to them. I will miss her dearly."

"I think Gabrielle may find an attachment between Bernadette and me a little hard to accept."

"You underestimate Mademoiselle Lafayette. She is a remarkable woman. You suggested once that I might even be in love with her; I tell you now it is true, I *am* in love with her, since she was a little girl, but I have no desire to possess her. Can you understand such a thing? She is your lover, Mr. Graves, and you are indeed a lucky man,... but she is also a part of my enlightenment. A man's soul does not confine itself to one expression. No sooner do you think you have defined it than it is shape-shifting again into an unrecognisable form! What is your soul telling you when you look at Bernadette. A less enlightened man would see it in very simple terms, and chase his soul image through the wreckage of one human relationship after the other. Do you recognise yourself in any of my words?"

My head rolled forward and I closed my eyes in a vain attempt to make sense of what he was saying. He was still talking, and I wanted him to stop. If this was a dream I wanted to remember it so I could make an accurate accounting of it in the journal, for surely amongst all this over-baked theatrical imagery, there was a clue to the puzzle of La Maison, and how the hell I'd found myself trapped in it.

"Whilst loving Mademoiselle Lafayette," he was saying. "Whilst, rescuing her you must also find a way of loving Bernadette, while not desiring to possess her. Therein lies your challenge. And as the days unfold I think you will discover you cannot have the one without reconciling the other, because you see your soul in both of these

women, when in fact your soul resides in neither."

"Then where,..."

"Your soul is your soul, Mr. Graves. She can reside properly nowhere else but in yourself."

It was almost with relief then that I noticed Monsieur and Madame Lafayette, sitting across the room, both of them staring at me with expressions that would have soured milk. They were like pantomime villains, richly painted, and I warmed to the distraction at once.

"Have you seen the way they look at me?"

"Obviously they mean to unsettle you."

"What do they mean? You are none of you real here, you're all daemons, you all have a meaning, or a message,... what is theirs?"

"What is it they would seek to deny you of?"

"Gabrielle? She said something,... about them mirroring only my own insecurities,... my own rational voices."

"Quite,... when you look at them you see a part of yourself. They are reflections of your Ego, Mr. Graves."

I noticed then that no one else was dancing. "Why do only Bernadette and Heinrich dance? Where are the De Lucas?"

"The De Lucas returned to their rooms a while ago."

I stood, thinking suddenly that I had to find Gabrielle, that it was the most important thing in the world, if for no other reason than to lay my head upon the soft pillow of her breast and have her stroke my skin until this,... this episode had passed. But even as I thought of Gabrielle's breast, I saw,... or rather imagined Bernadette. She was reclining before me, and I had hold of her blouse, had ripped it in fact, ripped it open to reveal her breasts, and she was looking at me, gasping,... and crying out what? What was that expression? Horror? Relief? Passion?

Was I mad? Where were these things coming from? This was not in

me. I did not think or feel this way about Bernadette. I understood now how easily modern religions had collapsed the idea of the multifaceted and infinitely ambiguous daemon, into a more simplistic “demon”. They were so ambivalent, these entities, yet so potentially dangerous it was easier to distrust them all, to turn away from them. But for all of their dangers, their messages could prove so valuable, so enlightening, if only we could avoid their mischievous traps!

I rose angrily,... angry with the dream that it should be leading me in this direction, angry with those puckish daemons for teasing me with the potential corruption of this lovely young woman. The floor seemed to sway, and I swayed with it. Monsieur Lafayette also rose, his chair grinding against the dining room floor. His expression remained fixed and chilling, his eyes locked upon me as if he were about to challenge me to a duel. I stared back at him, angry and confused, my head reeling. But I was not looking at him,... not really *him*. It was me, an image of myself, of my own passion to remain in charge of my rational senses. How puffed up and inflated he seemed. No wonder I hated him – he reflected everything I was afraid of being myself. “Monsieur*?*”

He made no response, other than to tighten his lips. His wife looked on poisonously, the faintest twist of a sinister smile lifting the corners of her mouth. Then she drew a pistol from her handbag, levelled it at me, and fired.

Chapter 24

I felt a dull pain in my shoulder, I felt cold, I felt water all around me as I lay upon the pebble shore, half in and half out of the lake. My head was resting in Gabrielle's lap, she was holding me, the rat-tails of her wet hair fingering my face as she leaned over and implored me back to life, back to consciousness. I felt her breath, like a gentle breeze. I caught the scent of her and gave a startled jolt as I came more thoroughly back to myself.

Still she embraced me, as if afraid I would slip away and leave her alone in the world. I was afraid of it too, afraid of slipping back into that bizarre dream world, yet afraid also of Gabrielle's ravenous need, afraid of *being* needed and consumed.

I remembered then the face of her father and the snake-like smile of her mother. They'd been caricatures of course, but meaningful all the same, and I woke now with the knowledge that even if Gabrielle was completely insane, I had no choice but to give up every fibre of my being in order to rescue her, for who else would do it? Was this not my duty, my purpose? But could someone like me whose need for space was so overwhelming possibly be so selfless as to give it all up?

The staff here; they were not servants. I saw it now. They were adepts, though they did not know it, and I had to become an adept too. I had to raise Gabrielle above all other things.

“Richard?”

“What happened? Did it strike me?”

“No,.. there was a film of sparks on the water,... but I'm sure they did not reach you. I felt them too, like a tingle in my skin, but I remained conscious.”

“How long has it been?”

“Seconds my love,... that's all. I caught you and brought you into the shallows.”

I'd been an hour in the dream at least, and I'd experienced so much:

the words - whole volumes of them - and I tried to pour them into memory now so they would not be lost.

“You saved me?”

“It seems so.” She laughed. “I thought it was supposed to be you rescuing me.” She hugged me warmly. “We shall go back to the hotel, now,” she said. “Can you stand? This is my fault. I should not have made you come. You were right, the lights are dangerous.”

“You didn't make me come. I invited you.”

“But only because you knew how much it meant to me.”

“I feel all right now. Let's,... let's sit a while. At the pavilion. Dry ourselves.”

My muscles quivered as I walked, but I recovered quickly so that by the time we regained the pavilion, I was feeling myself again, except, there was also an inner calm that I was unused to, and something else, something growing,... a sense of awareness, an energy,....

We did not dress, but sat a while wrapped in towels. I was deep in thought, pondering the meaning of the dream, the vision,.. whatever it had been. Poor Heinrich,... if it had been anywhere near as real for him it must have been terrible to believe himself in love with Gabrielle, and then to wake from it!

She stroked my cheek with the back of her hand. I'd been staring out across the lake, arrested not just by the beauty of it, but by its feel. And it's feel was of heartbreak and longing.

“Richard?”

“My God, Gabrielle! I've never felt more alive.” I shook my head, trying to clear it. “The lights,... they're not dangerous to us – not directly. It passed right over us, remember? It's only when their energy is converted, by running to ground they become dangerous. Before that,... it's,... I don't know, it's like it only half exists in this world,... like the stuff of dreams.”

She kissed me then. She tasted of sex, and of the lake. The experience of her was so vivid in that instant I reasoned it could only

be on account of the fact that I had spent the whole of my life until then drugged into numbness, feeling only a fraction of what might be felt. Her hand began to explore, and I waited, breathless while her fingers made a speculative foray into the carnal depths of me. I had travelled across the boundary of normal experience, entered another world for a while, and now was being called back to the sensual realm. I could think of no finer welcome and she smiled greedily as I rose to fill her hand.

The power had failed when we returned to the hotel, and the generator had not cut in. All was in darkness, so that we had to grope our way inside, guided by the single candle glow from the reception desk. The night manager looked up from his book as we entered, recognised us and nodded a silent greeting, then lit a candle from his own and handed it to Gabrielle so we could find our way.

We had not spoken since leaving the pavilion, not spoken since our lovemaking, though my memory of it was more of a violent struggle than the gentleness of the times before. She had cried out for me to take her, to have her, to fill her. She'd implored me, challenged me with every powerful movement of her body to subdue her, and I had sought to respond, to show her the strength of my own feelings and my resolve, by the strength of my muscles, in overcoming her. And amid the madness and the animal pounding of our loins she had at some point lain still without my notice, so caught up was I in the heat of it until I roared out my release, and then I feared the madness had been of my own making, and that I had hurt her,...

“Gabrielle?...”

She'd lain trembling,... shook her head in dreamy satisfaction, and pulled me snugly to her breast, while her sex held tightly to my own. Hours seemed to pass, though they were more likely minutes, and finally, without a word, we'd dressed and walked back to the hotel.

We were thinking of it now. I saw it in her eyes as they were lit by the candle glow – my hand trembling as it tried to slot the key into the lock. And seeing me, reading my own thoughts, she smiled. The power of this woman frightened me, but I was also afraid that I would let her down. I'd known her such a brief time, but already I was aware that such a failing would destroy us both – her with the betrayal, and me from the shame of having failed her. Is that what the daemon who had taken Bernadette's form been warning me of? That I would betray her for Bernadette? No,... how could I? It would be something else,

something symbolic,... surely?

It explained the ferocity of my lovemaking. I'd used it to reinforce the strength of my feelings, the strength of my desire for her. But to whom? How can I explain this? The dream world to me was now much more than an imaginary place. It had a reality and a meaning all its own. I saw the characters in my dream - Gruber, Bernadette, Heinrich,... all of them, a cast of actors engaged in a stage-play, a parody of my psychical state. Here you are, they were telling me. This is what you are. If you don't like it, *change it*.

We were both changed by the events of that evening, but in a way that drew us only closer together, into a deeper intimacy and understanding. I felt this in the tender way we peeled off our clothes, then showered and soaped each other, as if to balance out the manner of our lovemaking. I felt it in the touch of the towels upon our skins as we patted each other dry, and in every touch, in even the texture of the towel itself there was a poetry, wordless but heavy with meaning.

We fell into bed and slept deeply, curled into each other. My last memory of that day was the scent of her hair upon the pillow as I fell away and entered my normal dreams. But poor dreams they were, like ghosts, pale transparencies, insubstantial and pathetic compared to what I had experienced in the vision. I do not remember them. Would my dreams ever feel the same again?

At dawn, I woke with the pale light and took the journal out onto the balcony to write. My pencil was arrested briefly as the image of Bernadette came to me yet again, bare breasted, gasping. Did I dare to write it down? Heinrich had dreamed of making love to Gabrielle, and I had not felt jealous nor outrage, because I'd come to understand in time the language of his soul-daemon. I only hoped Gabrielle would feel as magnanimous when she read of mine.

Chapter 25

Bernadette did not knock in the morning, so I was left to suppose Gabrielle's parents would be at breakfast. I remembered their expressions from the vision. They still haunted me, also of course the memory of Madam Lafayette's fatal shot. I didn't understand that bit – unless it had merely been the device necessary to launch me back into my own reality. Remember, I told myself, you never take your dreams at face value!

But what if your dream were in fact an alternate version of your reality. What then? Would it still be correct to view everything as an allusion or an allegory of a deeper truth? And if that were so, what was to stop us from reading what we thought of as our own reality in that way? There was nothing stopping us of course,... except the fear of madness, the fear of letting go of any rational hold on things. But if you *could* let go? If you dared to do it,... what then?

Gabrielle wore the jodhpurs and a clingy camisole, beneath a laced top. Her hair was brushed out and glowing, and seemingly more voluminous than ever, as if she were a flower come lately into bloom. She faltered only a little when we came down to find her parents sitting there. We were later than usual, both of us dead to the world after our lovemaking. There had been a gentle murmur of conversation when we walked in, as if for all of the extraordinariness of our circumstances, the remaining guests were adjusting, relaxing into the madness of it. But at the sight of us, they grew quiet. Even the De Lucas, normally so animated, spoke in hushed tones now. We were quite the sensation then, and neither of us comfortable with it.

Bernadette gave me a warm smile, a curtsey and a secret wink, then led us to Gruber's usual table. “I was afraid you would not be joining us this morning, Mr. Graves,” she said with a cheery twinkle.

She seemed restored after yesterday's anxiousness and I wanted to josh with her like before, but my tongue was tied now. I had seen her naked in my dreams, and there'd been something alarming about my relations with her. She noticed the change, thought perhaps she'd been over familiar, lowered her eyes at once and went on her way. Gabrielle noticed it too.

“Richard?”

“What?”

“You know how Bernadette likes to play with you.”

“She does?”

“You know she does, and you were rude just now?”

“I was?”

Anton caught my eye and nodded a polite greeting, but like Gabrielle, he'd noticed my subtle rebuff, and would no doubt read into it what he wanted. He noticed a tiny smear of marmalade upon Bernadette's otherwise spotless apron, drew her to one side and pointed it out. She nodded, and when I saw her again it was with a clean apron, and a chastised look. I wanted to call her back and apologise, but how could I? The moment had passed. Gabrielle watched all of this, or rather she watched me watching it, then leaned close.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

It made sense to confess it, and so I told her: “Last night,... when I blacked out, I had a vision, an hallucination.”

“Oh?”

“It was long and complicated but one of the less ambiguous aspects of it was an archetype, a daemon,.... a dream character, that had assumed Bernadette's form.”

She rolled her eyes, and fortunately her mind was filthy enough to follow where I was leading, without my having to elaborate any further. “My dear Richard,... two women in one night! Clearly I have underestimated you.”

“We weren't,... we didn't actually,... you know,... not to my knowledge anyway. I don't know what it meant.”

She giggled girlishly. “If you will forgive me, she is a little young for you.”

“Exactly! Which is why I suddenly feel,... embarrassed,... when I see her. The vision was so,... striking.”

She tipped back her head and laughed. “Well,... so long as it was not a premonition.”

“Trust me, I'm not about to throw all of this away by doing something stereotypically menopausal, with a girl half my age.”

“Only half?” she teased. “She's more than that I'd say.” She dropped her hand onto mine. “But you look so serious.” She glanced over to where Bernadette was now sweeping crumbs from a table. “You are picking up on something, though,” she said. “She is a strange one. They all are. If it's any comfort, I have dreamed of her too,..”

“You have?”

“My psychiatrists would have enjoyed me telling them of it. Indeed I fancy they would have come in their pants. They were mostly Freudians. You know? Thus my every ailment could be defined by the suppression of a sexual desire.” She sighed. “In my dream she was much younger,... a child suckling at my breast. I have no children, have never felt that sensation for real, *tu connais*? To suckle,... I have heard there is a profound connection, a fundamental need between a child and its mother that sweeps aside all other things. I swear it was real to me. I feel a tenderness for her. Could that not be it? That we are in some way to be mummy and daddy for her?”

I took a breath. “I'd apparently ripped her blouse open and was staring down at her bare breasts. So no,... I don't think so.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But it was still a dream, Richard. Don't let it upset you. What were your feelings about it?”

“Horror. Embarrassment. Confusion.”

“Well, there we are. You are saved. We are all capable of dark things. Did Herr Jung's writings not teach you this? Most of us simply choose not to do the bad things. That's all there is to it. And anyway you are thinking too literally – if my years of analysis have taught me anything about dreams it is not to take them at face value. We are to be mummy and daddy of something merely represented in your dream by Bernadette.”

“But what?”

“What is a child, to a man and a woman?”

“You mean apart from a pain in the arse?”

“Richard,... you wish to be serious?”

“I'm sorry,... go on.”

“It is a purpose,... something to be nurtured, something that is bigger than themselves, a purpose outside of themselves, while also being part of them. There is a need in Bernadette that Gruber does not satisfy. At first when we came here, I saw that when he spoke it was to him she looked,... but now, have you not noticed, she looks to you.”

“I don't know. What I do know however is that I'm the one who should have spent years in analysis, not you. You're the sanest person I know, and surely the wisest.”

She smiled a sad sort of smile. “I thank you Richard, but you may yet have time to regret what you have just said.”

She pressed my hand and we fell into a contemplative silence. Then I glanced over her shoulder to where her parents sat studiously ignoring us.

There must come a point in the bringing up of children when one realises the labour of the past decades will reap no reward other than the satisfaction of seeing your child settled upon its feet and making its own way in the world. You have to be protective of them, while not clipping their wings and rendering them fearful and useless in the face of life. The future is theirs, not yours and to demand anything in return from your child is surely the deepest perversion. To insist one's loving devotion be returned like a financial investment is to court disaster. If one's love is to be returned, like any kind of love, it must surely be earned in a different way.

I nodded politely to Monsieur Lafayette, if only to show I was not intimidated, even though I was, then lowered my eyes to the table, only looking up within the narrow shield of Gabrielle's form, and pretending nothing else existed except that which lay between us.

Gabrielle, sensing something of my discomfort, said: “Shall we walk in the hills today?” From her bag she produced a little map of the way-marked trails around the hotel, and proposed a route that looped up into the low alpine pastures, then back down to the pavilion. She seemed so enthused by the idea, I could not help but pick up on it. It would take us the whole day, and it would get us out of the hotel, away from scrutiny, away from our sudden celebrity.

“That would be,... very pleasant,” I replied.

“I wish I could say I am sorry for all of this Richard, but I cannot. I find that in spite of everything, I am,... very happy.”

“Yes,... I know,...”

“And you?”

“Me?” Happy? Yes,... but like my view of her parents, my happiness did not extend far beyond her profile. It was confined, contained, entirely by her. “Yes, I'm happy,... but without you?...”

“I know. But here we are, and it is good, yes?”

Chapter 26

I consulted Monsieur Lagrange and he agreed we should have no difficulties with the trail we had chosen. It was a little rocky in places and he suggested stout footwear, but otherwise assured me the change would do us both good. Meanwhile, the radio was burbling. I tipped my head in its direction. “Any change today?”

He gave a weary shrug. “They say always the same thing: to remain calm, that help will come. But they are also saying it will cost a lot of money to repair things,... and who will pay, Monsieur? But I ask this: Is Europe to be sent back to the Edwardian era, or is it to be restored? Surely it is to be restored. Common sense says it must, *oui* ? So what does it matter this talk of who will pay? It is irrelevant, yet even now, when buildings are on fire, and the middle of London is no longer safe for decent people to walk, there is talk of money!”

“London is a no-go area?”

He shrugged. “Your army protects the government buildings, the financial district, and your Royal houses.”

“And the rest has what? Gone to,... to hell?”

He gave me a sympathetic look. “Of the rest there is no news, only speculation. But then who cares about the ordinary people, the people of the back-streets, the people of the *banlieue* so long as the money is safe – for who else will pay? If you have no money, you are nothing.”

I closed the doors to the lounge so we could no longer hear the radio. “It's not doing you any good, listening to this all day,” I told him, disturbed by his sudden descent into cynicism and Gallic revolutionary zeal. “Look at the view. Read a book.”

He smiled. “I apologise, perhaps you are right. You would suggest one of your detective stories perhaps?”

“No, definitely not. Inspector Grantley is of no use to us here. Proust, perhaps? In search of lost time? That should keep you going.”

He laughed. “Ah,... very good. *A La Recherche de Temps Perdu*? I

have all seven volumes, you know? I also promised myself one day the time and the patience to read them. I shall begin at once. It is better than sharpening pencils. Even at their worst, things should be back to normal before I finish."

"That's the spirit."

He laughed and nodded his thanks. "Enjoy your walk, Monsieur."

Given that we intended to climb a few thousand meters along the trails, Lagrange arranged the loan of hiking rucksacks and waterproof coats. For the rest, we managed to gather an assortment of sensible clothing from our luggage. It was still warm and bright and clear, but we were venturing a little further into the mountain regions and it was wise to be prepared for poor weather.

We ordered a packed lunch, and flasks. Gabrielle borrowed field glasses from Gruber, and I decided, after much thought it might also be prudent to take the gun. I loaded it as best I could, my fingers trembling as I handled the cartridges. Fearful of accidents, I left the chamber directly under the hammer empty, giving us five shots. But shots at what? At whom? I'd not handled a gun before, except for the die-cast cowboy cap-shooters of my boyhood. The real thing was considerably heavier, and the years had left me ill suited to the feel of it. I remembered scenes from my childhood - the hurried twenty-one gun salutes of black masked paramilitaries fired with handguns over coffins of despair, and in the end I felt so nauseous I decided to leave it behind.

Again the air was thick and humid, even before mid-morning, but the sky had by now taken on a deep haze that bordered on grey, rendering the mountains and the lake in unattractive monochrome. This sudden change filled me with foreboding.

I'd already begun to dread the coming of evening, and the dance, fearing that, in a sense, I'd already been to it, at least in my dream, a dream that had been so real it could not be distinguished from reality. Was I to relive that night? Was I to find myself facing Gabrielle's father yet again? Would her mother shoot me? Would Gruber give Bernadette to me once more, and were she and I eventually going to do something we would both regret?

"Are you all right, Richard?"

“Gabrielle,... I thought we'd agreed never to ask each other that question.”

“Yes,... we agreed, didn't we? Then let me put it another way: do you want to carry on?”

“Yes,... yes. It'll be fine. Ignore me.”

“I could never ignore you, my love.”

“You are being ironic?”

“No,... I don't think so. Richard, I've been meaning to ask, does my hunger drain you?”

I took a breath. “I'd only find it draining if I were not prepared to surrender myself to you completely.”

“And,... are you? Prepared?”

“Yes,... I am. You may consume me, and I shall enjoy every minute.”

She turned away briefly. I thought it was to hide a smile, but in retrospect, I know it was to give herself time to brush aside a tear.

News of our hiking excursion had apparently spread. On the steps of the hotel we encountered her parents, tweed suited and booted and Tyrolean hatted. They did not speak and appeared more interested in their week old copies of La Monde, though after we'd passed, Gabrielle glanced back and caught my arm.

“I think they intend following us,” she said.

“Why would they do that?”

“To make a,.. how do you say? A nuisance?”

They were fifty yards behind, eyes upon the trail, sauntering leisurely. It might have been a coincidence, I supposed, but this seemed a less likely explanation as the trails diverged and we chose our route, turning this way and that, climbing ever more steeply into the hills, to find them still behind us, toiling doggedly like a pair of determined trackers. Given that we had twenty years on the pair of them, I thought

we could easily outpace them, but Gabrielle told me they were experienced walkers, and if it was their intention, they would stick to us like glue, all the way.

As the trail steepened, I felt my breath becoming short and the strength of my legs giving out prematurely, as if I were being hauled back by the weight of our followers. It was ridiculous. “Stop a moment,” I said, then sat down by the trail.

I was struck by the widening vista now – the lake spread out below in ever more detail, nestling in its bowl of mountains. The Lafayettes also stopped and turned their faces to the view. “This is childish,” I said. “Let me go down and speak with them.”

“You said you wouldn't. You promised.”

“But they mean to shadow us at every turn. To,... I don't know,... crowd our space or something. It's bizarre.”

“Please, Richard. Things between us are,... untainted. Let it remain so. They will only poison it.”

I'd already decided to place my trust in Gabrielle, so I didn't press her further. And later as we continued our ascent into the rockier parts of the trail, she said: “I will tell you all my secrets,... but not now,... later,... I promise.”

“It's all right, Gabrielle.”

“Meaning what? You don't want to know? All right, I'll keep things to myself.”

“Look, maybe I'm wrong here, but I'm sensing you may be afraid of my reaction. I'm not exactly the finest specimen of mental health, you know? There are things in my own past I would be shy of revealing.”

“You think the only darkness is inside of my head? You are mistaken. I have done things,... things you may not suspect me capable of.”

“You've already told me.”

“About attempting to kill myself? Trust me, this is nothing. I have done much worse than that.”

“It doesn't matter. I don't care.”

“Oh? It is a nice sentiment, Richard, and I thank you for it, but some things cannot be reconciled by platitudes. It will test you, what I have to say and you must be prepared for it.”

“Okay.”

“We are alike, we are,... both of us neurotic. This is good for me. I find the neurotic more interesting than the apparently sane. It was Krisnamurti, I think, who said that it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society? So, for myself it makes more sense to be attracted to those in distress, because I feel they are more trustworthy, more sincere. Their vision is clearer. They see the madness of the world and they complain of it. They are not content to go on day after day pretending it isn't there. You feel it too. I know you do.”

“All of that's true, “ I sighed. “I'd no idea I was so transparent.”

“You have been leaning too long against the world, Richard, trying to get along with it, but failing. You betray it in the way you move, the way you look at me, as if hoping that somewhere in my madness there is the magic key that will release you. This is what I see in you. It is what draws me. Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps I, how do you say, project only what I feel inside of myself? But there is an affinity between us. It is mysterious, irrational, but what else have we to go on? And there is something else,...”

“Oh?”

“I feel the most myself when I am with you.”

We paused again and looked back. We had gained some ground, our conversation taking our minds off our growing fatigue, and paradoxically urging us along at an ever faster pace. Gabrielle squatted and pulled the field glasses from her rucksack. “There is someone behind them, now,” she said. She handed me the glasses. “Can you make them out?”

I focussed on the feather of Madam Lafayette's hat, puzzled for a moment, as the blur became sharp, that her features had a familiarity about them – the line of her nose, the curve of her eyebrows. It was as

if for a moment I was gazing through the glasses at Gabrielle. There was a family resemblance, certainly, but it was more than that. For an instant I swear, Madame Lafayette had become her daughter. Quickly I turned the glasses further down the trail. “I can see Anton,” I said.

“Ah. This does not surprise me.”

“He's waving to them now. Gruber's sent him as their guide perhaps? He's,... carrying a rifle. Perhaps they will ask him to shoot us.”

“Not us,.. you. But we shouldn't joke.” She looked at me then. “Why are you here, Richard?”

“Why?”

“Why are you with me? I only ask it because I know a man will go with a woman, or do anything for her, in exchange for sex, no matter how unlikely or odd she seems to him. She leads him by the nose, or more probably *la pénis, oui*? Emotional matters are not as important at the beginning as the sex, *oui?*. But later on, when the sex becomes difficult or boring, he will ask himself why am I still with this mad woman? It is then she will begin to appear ugly to him, and tiresome.”

“All right,... there's some truth in what you say. I'm with you because I'm completely infatuated. I'm with you because I cannot be without you for more than five minutes at a time, and when I'm not with you, I must always know where you are, then I can go to you directly if I can no longer bear our separation,.... I'm with you because,...”

I was gathering a head of steam and could have gone on but she arrested me with a shake of the head and a look of regret, as if she wished she'd not asked. “It is enough,” she said. “Richard, whatever is in my past, trust me when I say, that if I am with you it will always be my intention to see to it that you are happy. I do this in exchange for your protection, you understand?”

“My protection? I think I'm a poor choice for that.”

“Why? Because you are not so young and handsome as Anton? Because your gun is not so big as his?”

“Why are we talking about Anton?”

“We aren't. Don't be so obtuse. By *being* with me, you protect me.” She patted her breast. “In here, *tu connais*? You know?”

“Yes,... yes I know,” I replied, though in truth I did not. Indeed the truth would be a long time coming yet .

“If I think I can no longer make you happy,” she said, “then I will not labour things between us and I will find another protector.”

“Well, thanks a lot.”

She was smiling but I knew she meant it. She *would* find someone else. There was something pragmatic in her sudden attachment to me, even though she spoke of affinities. What had she said at the beginning? *Your bed is empty, so is mine, what else is there to say?*

“But I hope it will not be that way,” she added.

“Me neither.”

“You are not like any man I have ever known before,” she went on “My lovers, they have always been so sure of themselves, even when they were falling apart,... but you,... you have the vulnerability and the sensitive self doubt of a neurotic woman.”

”Em,...”

“I don't mean it as an insult.”

“Okay. “

“We are not ordinary lovers Richard. We are both too crazy for that.”

We continued on our way, the trail levelling off at around a thousand metres and opening onto a long, narrow plateau, criss crossed with the fences and hedgerows of alpine pastures. For the first time then, I began to feel cold. The grey of the sky had darkened, taking on the texture of a storm, its mixed shades swirling with a slow, ominous energy. Looking back down the trail, I saw the visibility had begun to dissolve, and could no longer make out our followers. It was as if they had become hesitant at the sight of the weather ahead, and fallen back. For us however, the weather was the preferable option, so we welcomed it and strode on purposefully. Beyond the pastures another

limestone escarpment rose steeply to a profusion of rocky summits, its precipitous slopes thick with tenacious pine between whose spiky outlines a mist had begun to writhe as it descended rapidly.

When the rain came, it came unexpectedly and with astonishing force. I thought we'd be all right for another hour at least, and by then be safely down the trail on the other side of the meadows. But the sky had darkened with unnatural haste, the grey deepening to a warning green, then killer black. We gasped at the force of it. It was like standing under a waterfall, and we were drenched before we could even think to pull our coats from our bags.

I spied an open-sided barn, partly hidden by thickets and we ran to it, eventually collapsing, exhausted upon a log-pile, dripping wet and shivering. Gabrielle, her hair hanging in rat tails was trying to control her laughter. At first I thought it was hysteria, but it was genuine happiness, excitement even, at the sensation. Sure,... it was sensation she sought. I remembered her on the back seat of Gruber's Porsche, the look on her face as her hair blew out in the wind – the look of bliss, as if the wind had become the fingers of her lover. But she would not be laughing I thought, when our followers joined us, for what choice had they? This was the only shelter for miles. And then what would we have to say to each other?

There came a fresh wind to further chill our skins, and with it what sounded like the repetitive slamming of a door. Gabrielle, still beaming and giddy with pleasure, took out the soggy remains of the map and studied it. “We are here,” she said. “Look, there should be a chalet. Perhaps we can beg shelter for an hour while the rain passes.”

The chalet was tucked to one side, close at hand, nestling in a fold of the hill, behind a screen of pines. It was a traditional herder's hut, very small, a place the herdsman would have lived in the summer months, to be sealed up when the worst of the winter arrived, and the cattle were moved lower down the hill. It was a sturdy place, dark stained timber, timber shingles, a pile of logs at the ready in the wood-store beside it.

“It's so pretty,” she gushed. She could not have been any less uncomfortable than I, yet seemed impervious to it. The more strange, the more challenging the circumstances, I swear the more Gabrielle came alive!

The door was open, swinging loosely in the wind. We called out, but

there was no reply and the weather forced us inside. The shutters were fastened up so the interior was dark – all wooden walls, stout country furniture, plank floors and rugs. It was built to last, built to survive the hardships of being locked in snow and biting frosts for months on end, but though it was high summer now it hadn't been occupied for a while. The hearth was clean – no ash, no half consumed logs, and I supposed whoever owned it had not made it back up the hill – their four-by-four lying useless on the highway perhaps, or perhaps it was a holiday home, the old ways dying out here as they were everywhere else in the world, fallen foul of the dubious blessing of tourism. She looked at me uncertain now, and sobering quickly. “It feels strange,” she said. “Do you not think?” She hugged herself against her unease.

“Someone's been here,” I said.

Kitchen things were strewn about, a trunk burst open, white wood showing like a scar where the padlock had been forced and there were blankets and towels hanging from under the lid.

She was puzzled. “Looters?”

“It would seem so, the door's been forced too. That's why it won't shut.”

I was able to secure it from inside with the internal bolt, then set about looking for some means of getting a fire going. Meanwhile Gabrielle, tidied up the mess – the burst trunk, the upset pots and cupboards.

“What a shame,” she said. “But surely, I cannot think they would have found anything of value here. Only stale biscuits, and old copies of Vogue magazine. And on foot? How would they get away with their spoils. It makes no sense. For loot you would stay in the towns, not wander into the hills.”

I found kindling and matches and was able to coax a hearty fire into life. We were cheered by it and Gabrielle peeled off her sodden clothing, setting it to dry over a chair back, while sitting in her bra and pants, warming her hands. I couldn't bring myself to do the same because any second I was expecting to hear a banging on the door when the Lafayettes and Anton finally caught up with us, breathless and soaking, seeking shelter. I'd rather face them cold and soaked and clothed, than warm and dry and naked.

I dreaded their inevitable coming. Or perhaps, I mused, it was for the best,... that there may even be a clearing of the air – our conversation at first stilted, but finally relaxing into pragmatic cooperation, for we would surely be trapped up here for hours. Yes, yes,... it would be for the best. But half an hour passed, then an hour, and still they did not come.

“They must have gone back down,” I said. “But surely they would have drowned in it by now!”

“Never mind them,” she said, “We did not ask to be followed. It serves them right.” She raised her brows at me still sitting in soggy clothing. “You are shivering, my love.”

I gave in and undressed, still puzzled that they were not on our heels. The last time I'd looked they'd been only a hundred yards behind, reaching the flat of the meadow, the hard work of the ascent behind them. Gabrielle took the blankets from the chest, and we sat huddled together by the fire, warmer now, cosy in fact, while the rain hammered upon the shingles in an unbroken cacophony. We opened our rucksacks and nibbled at the food we'd brought with us.

“It sounds as if it means to burst in upon us,” she said, but from her expression I could see she was not afraid – indeed I suspected she wished it *would* burst in, for then the sensual experience would be all the more intense, even if it washed us all the way down the mountain and dumped us back in the lake to drown.

“We should be okay,” I said. “These places were built to last.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” She sounded disappointed. “Do you play chess?”

“Hmm? Oh,... I used to, a long time ago,...”

She'd spotted a chess set lying on a bookshelf, amid dusty copies of farming magazines and mildewed paperbacks. So we huddled together over a footstool by the fire to play and it surprised me not one bit that she proved unbeatable, her mind always at least three moves ahead of mine. In my defence I said it was unfair, that I was distracted by her sitting in only her delicate under-things, but she replied that the same excuse might easily apply to her. So I asked if she was indeed distracted and she smiled, shaking her head, while running the phallic head of a bishop over her plump lips. And, observing the growing

arousal in my shorts, she remarked that plainly I *was* distracted, and she apologised for defeating me under such blatantly unfair conditions. Then, reaching over, she unfastened me and asked, very sweetly, how she might make amends for it.

My lungs collapsed at her touch, and as she moved her hands upon me, she said: “We should enjoy each other while we can, Richard. I fear it will soon be gone, this awakening at the slightest look. Soon the sight of me in my under-things will speak to you of slovenliness, not sex.”

“What?.... don't,...”

“Don't what? Spoil it? Do my words spoil the pleasures of my hand for you?”

I shook my head, afraid she might stop. Her words did not spoil the pleasure. Indeed they heightened it, but only by reminding me of the danger of its impending loss. I told myself I should guard against all possibility, that I could never let this woman go, that I could never let the sight of her fill me with anything but desire. The thought that I should ever become indifferent to her was appalling, but as she'd pointed out, it was very much a possibility; is it not the same with all relationships, between a man a woman?

“Touch me,” she said. She closed her knees so I could slip her pants down, then she opened her knees so I could explore her, as she explored me. And while the rain hammered upon the shingles we each breathed out our unbridled pleasure, slowing the rhythm of our touch as if we intended stopping time and preserving the moment for eternity.

Please God, I thought, don't let it end!

I stoked the up fire with logs and we curled upon the couch together, then slept, one or the other of us waking at long intervals, to hear the rain still falling unabated. Thus we passed the remainder of the day, in cosy isolation, and then the night came and we remained in each other's arms, though mostly awake by then, yet lost to daydreams, as if, like a shaman's drum, the hammer of the rain had induced visions in us, so that although we lay together, we each travelled to places far beyond our skins, and beyond our knowing.

By the small hours I was becoming restless, but there was little to do in the hut. I would have read, but the novels were a mixture of French and German. My French was passable in conversation, but I found the reading of it laboured, while German was very much a mystery to me, so there remained only the continued presence of my thoughts.

“Are you awake?” I asked.

She curled herself more tightly against me. “No,” she replied.

“I'm glad we came up here.”

“So am I? We shall come again perhaps?”

“I'd like to. We've missed the dance of course.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps they have postponed it.”

“I hope they didn't. I don't want any of it to have been a premonition.”

“Your dream again? You're worried it might come true? ”

“I'm not sure what I think, but it was so real and everything's so strange at the moment I'm prepared to believe in anything.”

Gruber had said so many things in that dream, all of them disturbing, but most of all I remember the feeling of isolation from Gabrielle, that she had gone up to our room and left me alone, that I wanted to be with her yet somehow in my vision I had failed. It made me determined not to allow the same thing to happen in reality. To be separated from her would kill me. I thought of it now and felt myself overcome with fear – fear than nothing linked us, except madness and sex.

“Richard, what is it?”

“I love you.”

She gasped. “Be careful what you say, or I might believe you. I too am prepared to believe in anything these days.”

“I can't be careful. I have to be honest. And I love you. That much is clear to me.”

It was true. I *loved* her. More than that though,... I was *in* love with her.

“Clearly you are intoxicated,” she said. “Sex can do that to a man. But I forgive you.”

“I'm feeling a little overwhelmed, that's all. I'm trying to think ahead, to what might be,...”

“Then stop. What is wrong with the present moment?”

“What?”

“Tell me. Think. What is wrong? Right now. This moment. Here. Now.”

“Nothing. It's blissful.”

“Exactly. But the past? It contains all our regrets, yes? Things that, when we think of them cause us to shudder at the remembered pain. And the future? It contains all of our anxieties, the things we fear might yet happen to us. Yet past and future, they do not exist. So,... stay with me in the present moment, Richard, and all will be well.”

“I've never met anyone like you, Gabrielle.”

“No, and one day soon you will be wishing you had not.”

“Be like that if you must. But I still love you.”

The fire had gone, but the chalet remained warm, the darkness beginning to melt with the coming dawn. She felt hot beside me, her flesh so soft to the touch, so perfect, and though she intoxicated me, I had not lost my senses when I asked her:

“Will you marry me?”

She drew a sharp breath and closed her hand to her mouth in astonishment. “Richard, what are you saying?”

“That I am in love with you, and I want to marry you.”

“You don't know what you are asking.”

“I think I do. But you don't want to? It's too old fashioned perhaps? Too

soon,... of course it's too soon,... forgive me. What a stupid thing to ask!"

"*Mais non*,... Richard no,... it's,... I cannot say what it means,... how special, to me,..." She laid her head against my arm, tapping it gently as if in regret for something unspoken, some invisible barrier. "There are things,..." she said. "Things I must tell you,... and I *will* tell you, only not now,... please. I give you this opportunity to step back and save yourself. But if, after I have told you, you are determined, then ask me again, and I *will* marry you, yes? But,... if in the light of this knowledge, you choose not to ask, then I will understand and we will never to speak of it again, *oui*? But I also ask, no, I *beg*,... that whatever I tell you, you will still take me with you when you leave La Maison?"

I could not imagine what she might have to say that would so darken my opinion of her. I shook my head, trying to clear it. I'd proposed marriage to her and she had both refused and accepted me at the same time. Only Gabrielle could have done such a thing.

Chapter 27

The rain had stopped and, stepping outside of the chalet that morning, a clear sky greeted us: amber over the mountains, blending to pink at the zenith, and there was a tremendous clarity, so that I saw all of the lake spread out, far below, in crackling detail. Also the mountains had drawn near and were likewise rendered crisply so that every rock and fissure seemed close enough to touch, or at least to feel with the fingers of my mind.

Underfoot, the paths were awash and the escarpment, rising to our backs was alive with the sound of rushing water pouring from every gulley, while the streams leaped and roared their way down the hillside. Gabrielle tidied all evidence of our presence in the chalet, and pressed the door shut. We secured it in place as best we could with a heavy rock, so that it would not blow open. We trusted these actions were not entirely futile and that there was still some decency in the world, though I suspected what remained we carried in our breasts as a kind of naïve hope. Then, silently, we continued our journey, our stomachs complaining and ready for breakfast. We'd eaten nothing since our meagre packed lunch yesterday.

The limp remains of our map indicated a farm, some miles distant along our route and we hoped to beg sustenance there, but failing that we estimated we would be back at La Maison in time for breakfast anyway – it being yet barely 6:00 a.m. Along the way I looked at Gabrielle, half in wonder, half in query, but she read my mind and shook her head. "*Non,... pas maintenant*,.. " she said. "Not yet,...I must think how best to tell you these things,... about me. But I *will* tell you. I will tell you today."

Eventually, we rounded a low outcrop, and passed through a gate, then came suddenly upon the farm. It was of traditional design, not unlike the chalet we had just left, only bigger and with more outbuildings to surround it. There was also a man on his knees in the middle of the yard, his hands raised in supplication, while another man pointed a gun at his head, execution style. The man with the gun looked as if he'd spent the night in the open. He was drenched and filthy. As for who he was we had no clue, only the gun and its aggressive posture spoke for itself. The man on his knees meanwhile shook his head in stunned horror at the apparently unbelievable fate

that was to befall him. His life was about to end – mid-sentence, without explanation, nor any hint of meaning.

Another filthy looking man was coming out of the house, dragging a woman by the hair. While I looked at this scene with a kind of sickened wonder, I was aware of Gabrielle unzipping my rucksack and delving deeply inside, but I could think of no reason for it. Then, as our presence dawned upon the protagonists in this strange drama, and they turned their eyes upon us, Gabrielle was already advancing towards them, the revolver held in both hands, and without further provocation, the revolver let out a roar.

I would not have done it. I would have frozen and let the situation work itself out to whatever nasty conclusion it already seemed to be heading, but Gabrielle's apparently mad intervention unnerved the scoundrels and though at least one of them was armed, they took fright and ran. Still, not persuaded by her apparent success, Gabrielle fired again, and from long range I saw the spat of blood upon the buttocks of one assailant and when she fired yet again, I saw the branch of a tree ahead of them fall and guessed she'd missed their heads by inches. The armed raider was so alarmed he was even persuaded to toss his gun aside as if in surrender, and then they bolted into the forest.

She handed the revolver back to me. “Did you bring more bullets?” she asked.

“What? No,... I thought I'd left the gun behind.”

“I saw you,” she said. “I put it back in. Forgive me?” She allowed me a quick smile, but it was bravado; her hands were shaking. “Not bad for beginner's luck,” she went on. “I think I got one of them.”

We trotted over to the farm. I was still uncertain as to what I had just witnessed. Gabrielle threw her arms around the woman and helped her to her feet, reassuring her all the while. The man was sitting on the steps of the farmhouse, leaning back against the doorpost, openly weeping. I felt helpless, thought briefly of the police, but it was useless; even if the telephone at the farm had worked, it would have been days before a policeman ever showed his face, if at all. Though it horrified me, I realised Gabrielle had done exactly what had needed to be done. But if such a heinous thing were possible *here*, half way up a mountain in the idyll of the Swiss Alps, then what was it like in the towns and cities of urban Europe?

That we ourselves were armed rendered the farmer and his wife initially suspicious of us, even though we'd been their saviours. But Gabrielle mentioned we were friends of Herr Gruber, of La Maison. This apparently was a name to open doors, and instil trust. We were invited inside at once. I sat in the kitchen with the farmer who now held his wife tightly, both of them pale-faced and shaken. Gabrielle took charge, and made a pot of coffee, then asked in an apologetic tone if they could spare us a little bread and cheese.

She was, as ever, quiet eyed, her movements suggestive of great introspection and languor, while her untidy hair spoke paradoxically of a wild energy, and she must have looked to this couple like an avenging angel – fearless, untouchable. I too sat in awe of her, no longer thinking how reckless she'd been, how easily she might have shot either the farmer or his wife by mistake, or been shot herself by return fire. She saw me looking, smiled and nodded.

“I know,” she said, softly. “It was a bad idea,... but sometimes it is the bad ideas that change things for the better, *non*?”

We stayed an hour, though what reassurance we could give I do not know. Gabrielle asked the farmer if he had a gun, that he should keep it close for now, and though it might go against his nature, not to be afraid of using it, that the times were difficult and it would be a while before order was restored.

When we took our leave it was with a feeling that we could not help them by staying any longer, but that we were equally abandoning them to an unknown fate, alone up here, with the forest possibly infested with bandits. From the mud as we passed, Gabrielle stooped and picked up the discarded pistol. We could not imagine what had possessed the man to throw it away. Perhaps he'd thought he would be less likely to be shot, if he was unarmed. She looked at it in disgust and was about to toss it in the hedge, but decided it was worth keeping, and wiped the dirt from it on the leg of her trousers. I raised my eyebrows, uncertain, but she reassured me that she knew what she was doing, and was fully aware that if one chose to carry a gun, one must also be accepting of the consequences.

This was a bad turn, an evil turn, and I did not like it, but so long as I could be with Gabrielle, everything else was secondary and manageable. Only if I lost her now would the world become an irreconcilably dark place.

The trail led down into the forest, where the air was pine scented and profoundly still, quiet enough for me to hear her draw breath. Our pace had slowed in defiance of the imagined demons now lurking in the shadows. I felt the mood lifting, and we became once more lovers in paradise. It was amazing that we could do this: change the mood of a place with our thoughts. Perhaps we invented other things too. What had Gruber said that time? I'd written it up in the journal only last night,...

...have you never observed how much one's inner life is reflected in reality, in the things going on around us? If we are irritable and out of sorts, then the world obliges and finds other things for us to get upset about. If we are fearful, it provides us with the reasons – one after the other.

Had we invited the bandits to cross our path because Gabrielle had put the gun back in my bag, as if in anticipation of them? If we'd left it out, would we have been spared our encounter with them?

It was here, in the quiet of the woods, eventually, she told me what it was I did not know about her.

“My parents will say this to you,” she began: “I narrowly escaped a prison sentence for the murder of my lover. I got away with it, they will say, because the case was dismissed, there being not enough evidence to convict me.”

This pulled me up because it sounded bad, but I was able to avoid jumping to conclusions.

She went on: “They will tell you I had motive enough in that he had betrayed me by sleeping with someone else, and was therefore, in my twisted view of things, entirely deserving of it.”

Again I did not speak, refusing to be drawn, but she pressed on, as if provoking me for a response.

“They will tell you I had threatened to do it. And it is true; I *had*. Also it is no secret I have a history of - shall we say - emotional turbulence? I mean who else but a crazy woman would fire a revolver at a stranger and think nothing of the consequences? All these things add up do they not? So the outlook seemed bleak for me. It was equally unfortunate that my lover was the son of my parents' friends and

remains to this day the only man ever to have been thoroughly vetted and approved of by them."

Still, I sensed more to come and felt it unwise to interrupt, except to urge her on. "And?"

She raised her brows. "And? *Baise-moi*, this is not enough for you?" She shrugged as if to say I had asked for it. "Very well, they will also tell you I attempted suicide on account of it."

"Ah,... when you jumped,..."

"Yes."

"On account of your guilt, or at the injustice of being wrongly accused?"

"Hmm,... Methinks he hopes for an explanation, Gabrielle! That I was *not* guilty? All right, yes, it was the thought of prison that made me jump. I would not have lasted a week. Any fool could have seen the case against me was groundless and bound to fail. He fell drunk from the balcony an hour after we had argued. He had enough alcohol in his belly to pickle a whale. The sound of our arguing was heard by the neighbours and this made things look bad for me at first, but the owner of the café where I took refuge was able to vouch for me. However one does not dare to hope such things at times of despair."

"So that's your dark secret?"

"Still, it is not enough for you? *Merde!* How deep must I go for him? All right,..."

"No,... I mean I'm sorry Gabrielle. It must have been terrible for you. But wait,... you're saying there's more?"

She took a breath. "Afterwards, I would escape my parents whenever I could. At one time it was in the company of a man who led me to the darker side of life, where I was to sell my body for a cheap actress of the worst kind, you understand? Oh,... don't look like that, I was not forced into it. I had a choice. I knew exactly what I was doing."

"Em,... are we talking about,..."

"*Oui – la pornographie!*"

"Okay."

"My parents caught up with me eventually and placed me back into the respectable arms of therapeutic analysis. To try to sell your body for sex is apparently much worse than attempting to kill yourself."

She sat down upon a tree stump and bowed her head, her hair closing over her face. Her body was shaking – half laughter, half sobbing. The laughter won out, though there was something hysterical about it. "I wasn't very good," she said. "I would not have lasted long in that business. There were too many things I would not do for the camera. Sex like that,... it is not to be taken seriously, is it? It somehow misses the point completely." She sobered quickly. "I did not kill him, Richard. It was an accident, but you know how it is? His family, my family, always they look at me and wonder. It is human to search for blame when something goes wrong, and I was an easy target. They assume I am capable of it, and this is enough to condemn me, enough to have me chained for safety's sake – theirs mainly. The scandal of it would be difficult for them were it more widely known, or indeed if I were to do it again – *la pornographie*, I mean, not the murder, which I did not do. I'm sorry, please sit down – you have seen your muse transformed into a harlot. It is a shock, I know, but at least she is not a murderess."

I sat beside her, thoughtful, not really surprised by any of this. "It's to be expected, I suppose" I said.

"Pardon?"

"The stages of Anima development," I said. "From child to chained woman, to harlot,... there is a recognisable pattern in most of the documented accounts of masculine individuation. Gruber's right, however, and sometimes the archetypes leap the boundaries, and manifest themselves in reality. You are living proof."

"Richard, it is very sweet of you to talk this way, but I know you are upset, and you shield yourself from me with talk of this,... this psychological nonsense. If you will forgive me I have sat before many an expert in psychoanalysis and labelled them all as poseurs and fools."

"I once stole a bicycle," I said. "I was eight years old and should have

known better – I returned it next day, but I still wake up sometimes feeling guilty about it."

"You are doing it again. And this taking a bicycle,.. it is hardly the same thing."

"I suppose not,... "

"It is unlikely to come back and bite you is it? Me? I have brought shame to my parents, with suspected murder and,... *oui,... la pornographie*, and they will never forget it. And you,... you must face the possibility that you will be sitting in a restaurant with me one day, and there will be a man who recognises my face from a grainy movie he has downloaded from the internet the night before while he,... how do you say?.... strangles his chicken?"

"Em,... well,... quite,... but does the internet still exist, I wonder? I suppose a good portion of it's been fried by now."

"Maybe it has, but again this is not the point, and you are evading me."

"I know. Look,... your parents will have to forgive you eventually."

"*Non*, they have had their chance. My life must be away from them, but alas, poor Gabrielle, she is so weak in the head she always needs someone to lean on. Hopefully her choice this time is less unfortunate than the times before."

"But you seem so strong. I doubt you need anyone to lean on."

"When we have known each other a year, you may wish to reconsider that statement. Maybe one day, I will be better able to cope with myself, but for now, whenever I am alone, I simply eat myself from the inside out,... what? What are you thinking?"

"I was wondering,... would Gruber have known about any of this?"

She shrugged. "He has never given any indication to suggest that he does, but it was in the newspapers,... the murder – not the other. So it's possible." She shook her head. "Well,... what comes next in the development of your,... what did you call her? Your anima? She is your soul image, *oui*?"

“Em,... next is the priestess, I think, or the witch, or the goddess, or something of that sort. I forget,... these things are becoming a bit of a muddle for me. And you're right – possibly nonsense as well.”

She laid her hand hesitantly upon mine. “I would like to be your priestess, Richard, if it will please you, or your goddess. There are many flawed goddesses in the pantheon I'm sure. I can learn the part and act it for you if you wish.”

“You just said you were a poor actress.”

She laughed. “No. The acting was all right. It was the objectification of my sex I had difficulty with. To be reduced to a number of orifices,... orifi,... please, what is the plural?”

“Never mind. Goddess, you say? I think it's already happened,... this morning,... just now. When you shot that guy. You were crazy, irresponsible, foolish,... but also inspired, magnificent and terrifying. Such are goddesses - flawed or otherwise.”

“You compliment me, I think? But,... I'm sorry,... I must ask you now: after everything I have said, do you still offer marriage to me?” Before I could answer she went on: “It is enough, that you will still take me with you when you go, that you grant me an escape, a way out, and a shoulder to lean on for a while.”

“The way things are shaping up Gabrielle, leaving La Maison is looking less likely with each passing day, and God knows what's going to happen to us in the end, but if we ever do leave this place, it's unthinkable to me that I should ever leave without you. And yes, my proposal still stands.”

“Then I accept it without further hesitation. Who should we announce our engagement to first, I wonder?”

Chapter 28

The lake had risen several feet in the night, and had largely flooded the shore-path. We followed its edge as best we could, and I waded through it when we had no choice, piggy backing Gabrielle who giggled with delight at each faltering step I made. And when we came to the pavilion it was to find that access to it was cut off. It rose in solemn isolation, the water lapping barely inches from the level of its floor.

“We could always swim to it,” she said.

At some point along the way – I know not when – I had already decided to say yes to any impulsive whim of Gabrielle's, regardless of any sensible reservations on my part. I'd decided to dismiss my inhibitions as being merely the chains that held me back, and her desires, no matter how irrational or wilful, or even just plain mad, as being the means of my own liberation. So, I had laid down the rucksack and had begun to unfasten my shirt buttons, when two figures rounded the point. It was Gruber and Heinrich, dressed for hunting in smart tweeds, like an Edwardian gentleman and his sporting assistant. Heinrich had two rifles slung over his shoulder – his own and Gruber's, I presume. And I marvelled at how rapidly the guns did multiply suddenly.

Was it me? Was I creating the guns? What had sparked it? Fear? I remember how I'd feared to take to the road, to escape in the car. Gruber had suggested the revolver for comfort, for protection and I'd been foolish enough to accept it, and now? No,.. get a grip Richard. Reality just *was. You did not control events, you did not attract things into being by your thoughts!*

Heinrich blushed when he saw Gabrielle and fell into Gruber's shadow.

Gruber waved a greeting. “Ah,... my friends! When you didn't come down the mountain last night, we were concerned. We'd just set out to look for you.”

“We sheltered,” I said. “We spent the night in a chalet and came down this morning.”

“And we are engaged to be married,” added Gabrielle – something of a challenge in her tone, I thought.

Gruber was taken aback,... “Em,... you,... astound me! But,... this is excellent news, what do you say Heinrich?”

Heinrich nodded and smiled politely, but there was a difference in him. He seemed far away. Being struck by the light had changed him. It had changed me also, propelled me into dreams so real they made me look anew at reality, unable to differentiate them, so real they reflected back in stark tones insecurities I was unaware of possessing. Heinrich was young, but there was suddenly the look of a much older man about him.

“Monsieur and Madam Lafayette,” I said, “and Anton; they were close behind us yesterday, but we lost sight of them in the storm. I trust they made it back all right?”

“Yes,... they are well. A little bedraggled but none the worse.”

Gabrielle had gone on ahead with Heinrich. She was talking to him, laughing, joking, touching his arm – I presume her intimacy was calculated to defuse his growing neurosis. And I thought: this is the woman who has been caged up, stifled, imprisoned,... and surely the world is now all the better for having her truly in it. Gruber leaned closer to me and said softly “I noticed they were in pursuit of you, and sent Anton to slow them down.”

If that was true, Anton hadn't been doing such a good job, but then the Lafayette's were probably too overwhelmingly assertive, even for the head waiter of La Maison du Lac.

“They fell back when the storm hit,” I said. ”And what a storm, I've seen nothing like it, and it lasted for so long,...”

“It was severe, yes, and prolonged, but not unknown in the mountains. So,... you are engaged to be married?”

Gabrielle heard him and looked back at us, smiling, something mischievous in her eyes now. “Fortunately these days,” she said, “Richard does not need to ask my father for permission.”

We were welcomed back to La Maison with genuine relief. The De

Lucas, encountering us in reception, were driven to touch us, to press our flesh and Bernadette, starched and soapy, embraced us both, then went on her way, blushing, and sniffing back the tears. Nonplussed by our continuing celebrity, we returned to our rooms, showered, then dozed a while.

Later, I settled back upon the balcony to bring our story up to date, resisting the temptation to be overcareful whenever Bernadette entered the scene. Yes,... I know I flinched just now when she embraced me,... *but you must forgive me Gabrielle. I have not the same skill in defusing complexes as you. This is something I hope you will teach me.*

It was only now, alone that I had time to reflect upon what had happened, not so much the adventure on the mountain and our encounter with armed bandits - for all these things seemed secondary to me now - it was more the the thought of what I had committed to, with Gabrielle. I was in awe of it, also profoundly stilled and inspired. I had come to La Maison a resolutely lonely man with not much of a record of success in my relationships. I had also come looking for the one story that was going to mean anything to me,... and found the solution to both in the same person: in Gabrielle.

I was not naïve. I knew it rendered me vulnerable. Gabrielle had a colourful past, to say the least, and possibly a self destructive streak that she barely held in check. But to lose her now would be the defining tragedy of my life, just as to put a ring on her finger, and finally leave La Maison in her company would be my defining success.

Around noon, another ball of light appeared over the lake, and an audience began to gather on the lawn to watch its progress. Gabrielle was asleep, so, planting a parting kiss in the soft cloud of her hair, I went down to join the others. It was becoming such a regular occurrence now, the light was greeted with an almost casual air – the audience more relaxed, their chatter about other things, about dancing, about the dinner menu... there were even rumours circulating of the imminent restoration of flights out of Zurich; the ash cloud was being deflected further to the north and airlines had brought planes up from the southern hemisphere. I stood a little to one side, observing both the light and the audience. As a species, I thought, we were, if nothing else, adaptable. A matter of days ago, there had been nothing like this seen on earth before, and now it was so commonplace, I swear next time no one would even bother to look.

Eventually Gruber singled me out and drew me to one side. “I must apologise,” he said. “I was hesitant earlier, when you broke your news to me. Indeed, I was quite taken back by it, but truly I offer you my congratulations.”

“Thank you. Though something tells me it was not the outcome you were expecting, which puzzles me a little, but never mind.”

“My dear boy,... I,...”

“Please, it's not important now.”

I did something then,... I reached over and patted him on the back. It was a manly gesture, not tender, more hearty, the firmness of my energy reaching deep inside of him,... and he accepted it, did not shield himself or evade it. He did not behave like a deceitful man. He was a man of secrets yes, but a man who meant others well. I was sure of it.

“It seems appropriate then,” he said.

“Oh,...”

“The dance. We postponed it last night – well we could hardly go ahead when you were lost on the mountain. It's to be held this evening instead. We can hold it in your honour,... in celebration, so to speak.”

I begged him not to make an issue of this, that matters were delicate enough between Gabrielle and her parents without inflaming things further by so publicly rubbing their noses in it. But of course my reluctance was not entirely on account of the fact that I wished to avoid the celebrity of it, it was also that the dance had been the setting for my vision, which still disturbed me.

“Very well, “ he said. “We shall be discreet. But the dance goes ahead,... everyone is looking forward to it.”

That's fine, I thought, but it did not mean I needed to attend it. “Herr Gruber,... about Bernadette,.... she's suffered some distress, hasn't she – I mean in her past.”

He sighed. “It's true, her past is not quite what you might suppose. But she's healing. Why do you ask?”

“I had a dream,... no,... it was a vision,... the lights,... they seem to possess an energy, or at least something that's transmitted at a frequency that,.. how to explain this. Herr Gruber, to be touched by the lights affects the mind. It seems to trigger a vision. Heinrich,... and now me.”

“You were,... struck?”

“Two nights ago, when we were swimming - a glancing blow, but enough to shift my reality to goodness knows where. At least it felt real – sights, sounds, scents,...”

“And Bernadette was in this vision?”

“Yes. So you were you,... and Heinrich, and the Lafayettes. I knew these were archetypes,... or daemons that had borrowed your forms,.... but in doing so they implied there was a significant connection between us in *this* reality. I was not surprised to see you there,... but Bernadette? It puzzled me. I did not think she had a role to play.”

He thought for a moment, then smiled. “There's something I failed to mention about Bernadette,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Her watch. Have you noticed it?”

“Her watch?”

“Take a look at it the next time you see her. She's a puzzle, my friend. And I leave it for you to work out what she means.”

We observed the light for a while but for us too the phenomenon was beginning to lose its strangeness, our lives filling up with other things, equally strange, and possibly more threatening.

“There are armed bandits in the woods,” I reminded him.

“Yes,..so it would seem.”

“I've never killed a man, but Gabrielle would have done this morning, had her aim been a little better. How soon before they come, do you

think? These bandits. The people here are wealthy, they have trinkets; gold watches, jewels,... Can we protect them? How many bullets do you have? Yesterday we thought the biggest danger was from these lights, but now,... now I think we need to watch our backs as well."

"We are many,... and we have guns."

"True, and I saw only two bandits, but there may be more. They also have guns, and surprise. They're also greedy enough to raid a remote chalet for whatever valuables they can find – like jackals, or wolves - while here we dine on trout and sautéed vegetables. They are feral, unthinking, uncaring. And they will come."

"Then we must counter the risk with increased vigilance."

"And if Schlesinger returns, we must also evacuate la Maison. Take our chances in Zurich. There'll be some semblance of order there, some authority – probably still struggling, but gradually taking shape."

He sighed. "Yes,... yes, I know that all sounds very sensible,... except,..."

"Except?"

"Why must we always fear our smallness and our remoteness? We have supplies enough to last for weeks – and not all vehicles rely on electronic components, you know? Why abandon what we have in order to reconnect with authority, when we can sit tight, relax, and wait for authority to reconnect with us – on our terms."

"You're digging in then?"

"You say there were two?"

"Two that I saw."

"Then two is all we know. And two are manageable."

"The staff?..."

"They shall evacuate if they wish, of course, but,... as you've no doubt gathered by now, most have nowhere else to go. I have created,... a sort of family out of strangers,... out of the disconnected. They are

my,... responsibility, and I will protect them. Forgive me, I need to think about this,... but I *shall* protect them, as I shall protect *you* and whoever else remains as guests of La Maison."

The light had drawn closer and was circling in the bay. Slowly then, it was drawn toward the nearest pole, several hundred yards away from where we stood. It loomed large, and there came a startled gasp from the crowd, then shrieks when it exploded lustily and vaporised the pole. Like before, there radiated a colourful carpet of sparks, several yards in diameter, as if the ground had been unable to consume all the energy in one go, but had gradually absorbed it, swallowed it slowly down into the depths of the earth.

Unknown to us, Gabrielle had woken and spied us on the lawn. She'd come up quietly from behind and had been listening in on the latter part of our conversation. Like us she'd been similarly cool about the light display.

"Will we also stay, Richard?" she asked, suddenly. "What do you think?"

"We shall if it pleases you, Gabrielle."

"It's settled then," she said. "I would rather – how did you put it Herr Gruber? Sit tight and relax, and wait for authority to reconnect with us, on our own terms?"

"Precisely, Mademoiselle."

"However," she said. "We will need to come to some arrangement over our mounting bill."

He laughed, so that the audience now turned their heads. And from their expressions, I was led to believe they felt we were the stranger of the phenomenon they had witnessed that day, that the tales they told would not be of mysterious lights, or of bandits in the woods, but of Richard Graves and his peculiar fiancée, Gabrielle Lafayette.

Chapter 29

News of our engagement spread among the staff, thence to the guests, and eventually I suppose to Madame and Monsieur Lafayette. In olden times they should have been the first to know, or at any rate we should have announced the news ourselves to them. But by their continuing antagonism they had succeeded in sealing themselves off from any meaningful discourse, and in Gabrielle's eyes, any hope of a reconciliation. It was regrettable of course, but she would not, after all, be the first child estranged from her parents, nor permanently damaged on account of it.

It was with a funereal expression then that Monsieur Lafayette approached us as we sat out upon the lawn that afternoon, Gabrielle sunning her knees, and me tapping a pencil against my teeth as I pondered the next lines of our story. We were bone weary after our walk, nervously exhausted after our encounter with bandits, and I could well have done without him, but it seemed he was determined in his course.

He sighed heavily, resigned to something, and then he said: “Gabrielle, I will speak with Monsieur Graves alone.”

She looked at him, her eyes like flint. “There is nothing you can tell Richard that he does not already know, Papa.”

He did not seem surprised, nor perturbed. “But still, I will speak with him, alone, if I may,” he said. His tone seemed gentler than when I'd last heard him speak – something resigned about it – even perhaps conciliatory.

I laid my hand gently upon her arm. “With respect, Monsieur, there is nothing I will discuss that Gabrielle cannot be party to.”

Gabrielle gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “It's all right, Richard. Let my father speak. I will be by the lake.”

She rose and strolled away proudly, queen like, head high, hips rolling proudly, as if to emphasise her transformation. Nervously I gestured to the seat she had occupied and her father sat down, his back remaining upright, his head held at an angle I no longer read as pompous – more

dignified, and I could not help admiring it, admiring *him*, and I wished we could be friends for there was surely much we could talk about? He took a moment to clear his throat and to gather his thoughts. “I apologise,” he said. “For striking you.”

This was good, I thought, and much more than I had expected. “I accept your apology, Monsieur.”

“I was,... not myself. These are unsettling times,...”

“Of course, yes. We're none of us who we thought we were only a few days ago.”

He nodded and for a moment I thought I detected the hint of a smile. “Last night,... on the mountain,...we thought you were both lost. For you I did not care so much of course,... forgive me, I did not mean it quite that way,... but Gabrielle,... ”

“We sheltered. We were perfectly safe.”

Was it this that had brought about such a remarkable softening? Had they thought Gabrielle dead? Had this sobered them?

“It will not work of course,” he went on. “Your engagement with my daughter. It is,... totally ridiculous. You have known each other for how long? A matter of days? I'm sure it is not a world record, but surely its equal in folly.”

“I can understand you thinking that, sir,... but,... I have never met anyone like Gabrielle. Such a thing,... time is irrelevant,... you know it is right, even at the first touch.”

He considered this for a moment and then he said: “You sound like you appreciate philosophy, Monsieur Graves?”

“My philosophy is a little homespun, I'm afraid.”

“It is sometimes the best kind. But tell me, why are we so unhappy, do you think?”

“You and I?”

“*Non, le Monde,*... the whole world. After twelve thousand years of

civilisation and culture and education and philosophical discussion on the finer points of life, I mean, you would think we would know by now the way to happiness, to contentment, to Shangrila? *Oui?* If there was such a thing in the first place. And having discovered it, we would pass it on to our children."

"I don't know. You're right, you'd think by now we would have worked it out."

"It puzzles you? Really? But it's no secret. Each generation discovers the truth anew for itself and strives towards it, but equally there is something in us that would tear it down the moment it is realised. And so, still, we destroy ourselves. On the one hand we have the painter of paradise, and on the other the vandal who would tear up the picture before the paint is even dry. Take Gabrielle for instance,..."

"Ah,... if by this you are alluding to a potentially self destructive streak in Gabrielle's nature,...."

He gave an ambiguous shrug, but I knew I was right. "I'm ahead of you," I told him. "I don't question your wisdom, but neither do you understand me, I think. I'm not afraid to be destroyed by her. Even if I were to see it coming, I would embrace it all the more."

He nodded. I think my fatalism impressed him. "She is changed," he said. "Is this your influence I am wondering, or is it something else?"

"We've all been thrown off balance by what's happened here," I said. "by the strange atmosphere, the strange events,... but Gabrielle has found herself. And I find myself in her."

He glanced down at the journal in my hands. "I recognise that book," he said, wistfully. "I bought it for her twenty first birthday. She never used it. And now you scribble in it?"

"Gabrielle is my muse, sir. She commands me to write our story, and that's exactly what I'm doing. It may seem trite, childish, but as a philosopher you must see that I have no choice in what I do."

"And in your story," he said, "you will describe me as what? Ogre or fool?"

"I will describe you as I see you. And I do not see a fool."

“Then what? Ogre? Please, it interests me.”

“I see only a man who has lost his daughter, sir.”

This drew him up. He'd not expected it, and I think he knew that it was true. “Yet I am sure you will not paint yourself as thief,” he said.

“Thief? No. You lost Gabrielle long before she met me.”

“Ah,... you are right of course. But what hope have I of finding her again? Please tell me. I would like to know.”

“At present, none at all, sir. You must give her the space to be herself, then let her rebuild her connections with you, but on her own terms.”

“Well. I thank you for your frankness.”

“I wish I could be more hopeful.”

He fixed me with a beady eye. Is this where he went in for the kill? “I cannot believe she has told you everything about herself.”

“I don't know if she has, but what she *has* told me I accept as the truth, and whatever anyone else tells me I will suspect as a lie. Gabrielle is my only truth now, even if she lies to me. Perhaps I'm a fool for bestowing on her the same reverence a man normally reserves for his muse, but I really see no other way for me. You strike me as a man of experience, sir, and wisdom, so I trust you to understand. I give myself to her completely, and I am untroubled by the potential consequences.”

He shook his head puzzled. “It does not disturb you, what she told you?”

“Were I an aspiring politician, or a seeker of some other public office, built on lies, deceit, and on the fantasy of a spotless reputation, then I might be afraid of a future scandal unseating me on account of, shall we say, Gabrielle's colourful past. But I am neither of those things. I am an ordinary man. Does she disturb me? Yes, immensely. But she thrills me in equal measure. I've been asleep, all of my life. Only this week, here, at La Maison, since meeting her, have I woken up.”

“Pah,... you speak like a writer of cheap romances.”

“Cheap detective fiction, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Nothing you'd be familiar with, I'm sure.”

“No, no,... you misjudge me. I am very fond of a good detective story. I study Balzac and Proust for a living. I am a professor at the university, but for entertainment, I am fond of Agatha Christie.”

“Then we have something in common. Agatha Christie, I mean. I'm also fond of Proust, but I wouldn't dare to say I understand him.”

“Nor would I, Monsieur, and I have studied him for thirty years. Listen, speaking of misunderstandings I see there is much of it between us, much of it irreconcilable I am sure, but I ask this of you: I do not know how much longer things can be maintained here. It is a façade, you know? How clean and smart the staff are, parading like little soldiers, warding off the forces of chaos, even though for all we know tomorrow the sky will catch fire, or the lake rise up and drown us all. So,... should the helicopter return, as I pray daily that it will, my wife and I will be on it this time. And I ask that you be on it also.”

“Me?”

“Yes, because that is the only way I can be sure Gabrielle will be on it too.”

“I'll tell her what you've asked me, but I know what her answer will be.”

“Then tell her also that you can do as you like at the other end. If there are flights leaving from Zurich, then take her to England with you,... anything. But you must get her away from this place. I fear for us all here Mr Graves.”

“At La Maison? But why?”

“Why? You clearly have no children of your own. Gabrielle must survive,... because she is my *daughter*.”

“I understand.” And really I *did* understand. “But I'm sure it's safer here than many places out there.”

“It is an illusion.” I could see he was certain of this, and it made me nervous. “Suddenly I see a lot of guns,” he went on, “It is like,... like the Alamo, *Oui*? And that did not end well.”

“Rourkes drift,” I countered. “The Zulu wars? That ended well.”

He screwed up his face, unimpressed. “For the British or for the Zulu? We are not soldiers, Monsieur Graves. We are not children. Guns are not the *friends* of civilisation. They are the harbingers of its decline. You are an intelligent man. You must know this. Have you money?”

“What? Yes, a little.”

“Good, you will need it. Listen, we already know the army will protect the moneyed classes first, and convey them in carriages to wherever the safe havens have been established. The poor will have no choice but to take to the roads with hand-carts and seek what sustenance they can along the way. But without money,...” he shrugged. “It is very simple, Mr. Graves. I have seen it in other parts of the world. So has Gruber. He knows how things will be. But the world has not seen anything on this scale since 1939, and maybe not even then. It is,... entirely without precedent.”

“That's as may be, but I should tell you Gabrielle intends staying until the emergency is over.”

“You don't understand. It will never be over. Not in our lifetime. This is just the beginning, *Oui*? Europe is changed for ever. The reports are dire. We have money, you and I. So, we need to be where order is, and that, I'm afraid is where the army is, where the guns are in the hands of soldiers who are as yet loyal to something other than themselves, not in the hands of bandits and civilians, for then our money makes us only targets for robbery, kidnap or stupid accidents.”

“I know what you say is true. But she'll not leave. She's *found* herself here. And I'll remain with her because,... I'm nothing without her.”

He realised I think that he wasn't getting through to me, and he nodded. “It casts its spell, this place. I have been coming here for twenty years, you know? It was not always Gruber who owned it, though I admit he has improved it. He also casts a spell, does he not? And what will you do here, the pair of you? Will you wear the same little uniforms, and trot about to his command? Will Gabrielle be his

new chamber maid, and you his lighter of cigars?”

“You misjudge him. He's,... befriended us. We'll remain as his guests, his last guests if need be.”

“Ah,... but is he all he seems?” He threw up his hands. “Oh,... he is resourceful, and protective,... La Maison is his castle and he will defend it,...” He broke off with a sigh. “Forgive me. I have said what I wanted to say. I beg you to change your minds, and when the helicopter comes again, get on it. Return to your green and pleasant land, to your Jerusalem, and if needs must, then take her with you, with my blessing. Tell her that also, though I know she will not believe it. But I beg you, Monsieur, do not get caught up in Gruber's war. La Maison is too remote to be protected by the forces of good,... and so it must fall to evil. And what then for poor Gruber and his smartly uniformed staff of little servants?”

Chapter 30

Gabrielle was reclining on a rug, by the lake, shielding her eyes against the sun. There was a bottle of Chardonnay in a cooler, a half consumed glass at her elbow. “Well?” she asked, as I dropped beside her. “Has he poisoned you against me now?”

I was about to answer, when I spied Anton striding across the lawn towards us. He held a book in his hands, and coming up to me he bowed and handed it over. “A gift from Monsieur Lafayette,” he announced. “With his compliments, sir. He hopes you will be able to accept it.” I took it, ran my eyes over the cover, mystified, then nodded my assent.

Gabrielle looked at it. “What is this?”

“A guide to *Proust*? An English translation.”

“Ah,... pfft,....” she turned away dismissively. “My father wrote it.”

“Really? Then it's a peace offering. Gabrielle,... this is,...”

Before I could finish she'd snatched the book from me and, in the same movement, sent it spinning out over the lake. It landed with a plop, then bobbed accusingly upon the ripples. She glared at it, as if willing it to sink, but it would not and she was furious with it for disobeying. For a moment, I spied in her a fragment of her mother. It shook me a little and reminded me of yesterday, of briefly glancing down the valley through binoculars and focussing on Madame Lafayette – on the feather of her hat – and seeing in her a ghost of Gabrielle. But there was more than just a likeness in her, I realised; they also seemed to share the same manically irrational temperament. It was one of the reason I so loved Gabrielle, that so drew my eye. But if that were the case, why was the same trait so repulsive to me in others? And in her mother particularly.

“I'm not poisoned, Gabrielle.”

“Pah! What did he have to say about our engagement?”

“That it would not work. That it was folly, that we'd known each other

all of five minutes."

"No surprises then."

"He also said there's a destructive streak in you, that you cannot be reconciled to happiness for very long."

She gasped, wide eyed. "He told you this?"

"Yes."

"And you believed him?"

"I can see how it might be true. But I've always sensed this in you. I possess it too."

"Then he's right, and it cannot work." Her nostrils flared angrily, but something in my gaze calmed her. "What?"

"I challenge you to make it work, Mademoiselle."

"Pah!"

"No,... I challenge you."

She thought a moment, then smiled, nodded and offered me her glass. "I accept your challenge, Monsieur."

I took a sip. "There we are then: all is well. He also said that if we can find a way out of here, you should come to England with me, with his blessing. If the helicopter returns,... then,..."

"Is that true? He really said that?"

"Yes."

"Then it is a trick. And anyway we have already told Gruber we will stay."

"I know, I told him that as well."

She relaxed, gazed out after the book, which still bobbed accusingly on the lake, and she laughed a little. "I'm sorry, Richard. I'm the one

who is poisoned – but for me, there is no cure." She stood up then, raised herself tall and gazed out over the water. "Next time," she said. "When the light comes, I shall go out to meet it."

I smiled but she shook her head. "You think I'm joking?"

"I was hoping you were, but now ,...I see you're not."

She looked coy suddenly: "Do it with me?" she asked, as if it were no more than a visit to the cinema or a trip to the shops.

"Jump to our deaths *together*, you mean?"

"Who said anything about death? You were struck by the light, so was Heinrich – and you both survived."

"I,... I didn't get the full force of it – just a tickle. And Heinrich had the gun between him and it. It vaporised the gun before it got to him. We would be killed for sure."

She thought about it. "Or,... it might change things."

"Gabrielle?"

"A transformation."

"Yes,... from life to death."

"But it took you somewhere,... to another reality, you said. Heinrich was the same. It,... transported him."

"It was an hallucination. And even if it wasn't, we both came back. There's no escape, Gabrielle. We are in this life, this version of reality, and there's only one way out of it."

"You could be wrong."

"Wrong? Of course I could be wrong,... but,.." I was searching for a logical reason where no logic existed, other than the basic need of man to avoid an unnatural death. "Who knows where we'd end up? There's no guarantee we'd be together. You,... you might end up as Heinrich's Mistress,... and I'd,.... I'd be heaven knows what ,..."

She looked at me, her eyes teasing. “With Bernadette?” she suggested.

“I don't know. I don't want to risk anything. I only want to be with you.” What was I saying? None of this was real. To step into the light would be certain death.

“Then find me. Rest assured, wherever we go, I will remember you, Richard. I will remember all of this, or surely it means nothing. So, we are agreed. You will follow me into the light, next time. *Oui?*”

Follow her? Take a chance on suicide. Risk death in exchange for a grotesque version of reality, peopled by shape-shifters and demons who would tempt me with weaknesses I did not know I had? Plunge myself into a nightmare, into a self constructed hell? For Gabrielle?

Chapter 31

I removed the rotor arm from the distributor cap of the MG. This is a small device that fits easily into the palm of the hand. Its job is to rotate and to deliver electricity to the spark plugs in the cylinders of the engine, one after the other. It's easily accessible from under the bonnet and, in the days before there were such things as alarms and immobilisation devices, motorists who knew about such things would remove them if they felt there was a risk of their car being stolen. Without it the MG would not start. Modern vehicles, from the mid-1980's onwards do not have them, relying instead on an increasingly opaque system of electronics.

If intruders were sneaking about, I reasoned, an old fashioned motor with petrol in it would be of considerable value, and I suggested to Gruber that he secured the Porsche in the same way. He had no knowledge of engines however and asked if I would do the job for him. I found him later, in the reception area, checking his watch against the mantel clock, and I offered him his rotor arm. He studied it for a moment, as if admiring its shape and its function, then he told me to hold onto it, that he would be unable to replace it himself, and so it made sense if I looked after it for him. It was a curiously irrational request, I thought,... but with Gruber there was always method in his madness, and I sensed he was both playing with me, and pacing in me a trust – securing the safety of his priceless motor in my hands. I was flattered and promised to guard it with my life. As for the game he might be playing, I had no clue.

Then I was in my rooms, washing the oil from my hands, Gabrielle beside me, soaking in the bath, watching.

“You will still take me with you?” She asked. There was something subdued in her tone now, as if she felt she'd pushed me too far, by suggesting we walked into the next light that happened along.

“Of course. My life would be unbearably dull without you.”

“But seriously, Richard,.... you will take me?”

“Yes. *Seriously.* I think you're right – you and Gruber. It's much better to wait things out here for as long as we can. We should keep listening

to the news,... keep alert for bandits. And, then as soon as we feel confident things are starting to get back to normal, we'll check out and drive away."

"To England?"

"To England, yes,... or anywhere you like, or just wander aimlessly. I might prefer the adventure of it,... the uncertainty of not knowing my destination. After all of this excitement, tea and crumpets in the English banlieue sounds a bit boring."

She nodded. "We are not made for it?"

"I don't think we are, no. Under normal circumstances, I think we're the sort of people who'd take off on a yacht around the world. I just didn't realise it before – only now,... only now do I feel truly alive. If I we ever get the chance to be ordinary again, that's what we should do."

"Or perhaps we should pray things are slow to repair themselves. When they are back to normal, there will be nothing holding us together, and we would find no interest in one another."

"Gabrielle, enough of this,... this *heaviness*. How can I cure you of it?"

"Oh,..." she shook her head. "Just dance with me tonight."

I'd been wondering how to broach the subject of the dance, how to tell her I could not go for fear of recreating the circumstances of the vision, for fear the vision had been in some way a premonition. But all that was in vain, and I could not disappoint her.

"If that's all it will take,..." I said.

She gave me a sideways smile, and a look of longing. "There is something else you can do for me."

She took my hand and pulled me into the water on top of her.

So,... I found myself, as in the vision, seated at Gruber's table, the gramophone playing dance tunes, their rhythms infectious, intoxicating. The floor was reassuringly full, Gabrielle by my side, her parents nowhere in sight, nor was Heinrich, and Bernadette waited upon us with charming forbearance.

“Is everything all right, Mr. Graves?” asked Gruber

Gabrielle replied for me. “Richard has been here before,” she said.

“You astonish me.”

I smiled. “You keep saying that, Herr Gruber, yet I fancy very little in this world astonishes you. You have the look of a man who has seen it all before, or at least this is the archetype I project upon you.”

He laughed. “Yes,... yes, I am your wise old man, you tell me. I'm flattered,... and honoured. I think.”

“This is the scene from my vision,” I said. “The one I told you about earlier.”

“And how is it holding up?”

“So far it's reassuringly different. The scene, the faces, even the feel of it,... not so theatrical.”

“Then you should relax and enjoy the evening. We must treat each day as if it were our last now.”

Gabrielle raised her eyes at that. “You sound like me, Herr Gruber. I should not have made you drink that toast to death.”

“But your company is so infectious, Mademoiselle.” And then to me: “Tell me, do you still lament the loss of everything you have ever written, Mr. Graves?”

I didn't have to think on this for very long. “Not at all.”

“But your words were everything to you. When you came downstairs that day your face was ashen. You told me you were nothing without them.”

“That's as may be, but I've realised those words were very much in the past, so any regret I might have is for something that no longer exists. And that seems self indulgent.”

He nodded sagely. “And what of the future?”

Gabrielle answered for me again: “The future brings uncertainty, Herr Gruber, but we have decided that, like the past, it shall not exist. There is only today. There is only now. And yes, we should live it as if it were our last.”

So far so good then. I was at the dance, yes, and though the evening was yet young, it bore no resemblance to the garish theatricality of my vision. It was perhaps safe to relax a little and enjoy it. Impulsively, I held out my hand to Gabrielle.”*Tu veux dancer, Mademoiselle*?”

She nodded, sealed her fingers around mine, and we rose as one. Then, hip to hip, and slowly, we began.

“Richard,” she said. “You know this cannot last.”

“Remember what you just said: there is only *now.* Only if we grant time permission to exist will what we have become ephemeral. So,... I do not grant it permission. This is La Maison. It is locked. There is no more time. We do not permit it.”

She smiled dreamily. “I know,... how romantic we are to say such things. But I am reminded of stories about the Titanic.”

“Oh?”

“All that grandeur,... tailed coats and tiaras, and they said that even as the ship went down, the band was playing.”

“Yes.”

“They could not stop time. They could not step inside a safe bubble of imagination. Their time was short, and they saw their end coming.”

“But La Maison still floats. And we shall at least have tonight.”

She nodded, smiled once more, dreamily, then tipped her head back as I spun us round, and she closed her eyes to savour the sensation of the turn.

There was an indefinable quality about dancing with Gabrielle, a mysterious thing entwined, vine-like, among the many branches of my pleasure. The room was hot, the gramophone a little too loud, but I was able to surrender myself to it, as I had already surrendered myself

to her. The dance was the pleasure, the vine was my detachment, and thus my ability to savour all the more how cherished a moment this would always be.

Had they really danced that final night on the Titanic? And who remembered those pleasures now? How many were even recorded? All that remained was the myth, and a powerful myth too. Suddenly I felt the enormity of time open up and swallow me. But in swallowing me it also seemed to swallow itself because I was granted the eerie notion that our sense of time was itself an imaginary concept, and that it was possible to step outside of it. Indeed, I had already done it.

“So,” she said. “How is your vision now?”

“Still different,” I said.

“You are relieved?”

“Naturally,... though I'm still afraid the evening might collapse into a replica of it. Perhaps we should have an early night. Cut the evening short.”

“Don't be afraid, Richard. I'm still with you. I must distract you with chit-chat. Tell me, have you a big house in England?”

“No, it's quite small, and unremarkable, I'm afraid.”

“Will I like it, do you think?”

“If you don't then we shall find one that you do like.”

She laughed. “You will tell me anything to please me. Is that not the way of all men?”

“I will *do* anything to please you. That is the way of men if they have the good fortune to meet a woman who can banish their self obsession.”

She blushed at my clumsy compliments. “You are different,” she said.

“Different from the other men you have known? Yes, I remember you said I was like a neurotic woman.”

She tipped her head back and laughed again. I was getting better at this, making her laugh. “No,” she said. “I mean you are different since the light struck you. More determination. You seem to drift less through your emotions. And there is a sparkle about you.”

“No. I'm the same coward I always was.”

“Yet you were afraid to dance with me once, afraid even to touch me.”

“I was, wasn't I? You're right; I have changed, but it's nothing to do with the light: It's you. You've changed me. You've brought me more into my self.”

"No, Richard. You have rediscovered something."

"Oh?"

"Your spirit. It shines from you now. This is what happens when your court your soul, perhaps. She seduces you spirit, makes love to it, and wakens it up."

At that moment, the power failed. The room was suddenly darkened, and there came gasps of surprise. We paused, waiting for the generator to cut in, but it did not. It had grown unreliable and though there was fuel aplenty, it required a party to go groping with candles in order to throw switches and to turn handles. In the mean-time, Bernadette appeared with a lantern and the darkness was gradually pierced by the amber light of other lanterns and candles to reveal faces that peered out from the corners of the room, now anxious. It was as if in the going of the light there had also gone the last vestiges of our pretence at civilisation, and the room that had moments before echoed with carefree chatter now carried only the murmurs of a renewed anxiety.

Gabrielle sighed. “What a pity,” she said. “They did not need to be reminded of things this way.”

People began to leave, seeking the imagined security of closed doors and warm beds, so that when the generator finally spluttered back to life, none remained but Gruber, Bernadette and Anton. And ourselves of course.

“We shall also go up, Richard?”

“Not yet,...” I said.

“But I thought you were eager?”

“Let's put another record on the gramophone. Perhaps people will hear the music and return.”

“I did not think you would enjoy the dancing so much.”

“I do enjoy dancing. And I'm afraid we might never dance again.”

“Hush,...” She stroked my face tenderly. “It will be all right,” she told me. “There will be many nights like this. You are feeling morose again, thinking we will end our story mid-sentence as you say? It's my fault with my talk of how this cannot last, and my morbid toasts to death. You must ignore me.”

I thought of the unfinished journal in our room,... the trail of dots from where I'd last left off,... and the memory clock ticking on my ability to recall the blur of events these past days.

“But how will we end?” I asked. “Will we drive into the sunset, with the whole of Europe restored to order, and the stock market sickeningly buoyant? Will we arrive at my little house in the English suburbs, weary but joyful, for our tea and crumpets?”

“Ah, but you make it sound so inviting, my love!” She laughed. “I did not say it had to end well, only that however it ends for us, it will mean something. And for those who read of what we did here,... they will say,.. ah,... how romantic!” She frowned. “Listen, the helicopter will return and take what guests remain. They will be urged to leave because of the worsening crisis, and they will go because who would want to stay with bandits in the woods and no policemen? Then we will be alone here.”

“What a peculiar thought. To be the last guests of La Maison Du Lac?”

Her eyes lit up. “Ah! There we have our title, Richard. You see how little by little our story comes together? *The last guests of La Maison Du Lac!* It is perfect, yes? You must not change it!”

With the departure of the other guests, Anton was bold enough to seek Bernadette's hand. I noticed she was a little startled, but judging by the

openness of her smile, she was pleased enough to accept it, though I wondered what Heinrich would think. Anton, Heinrich? What did it matter? It was for Bernadette to choose her dance partners, and the affairs of the young seemed terribly insignificant now against this background of upheaval, as I suppose did my own middle aged affair. Or did they mean all the more on account of it? Was it in love we sought the last evidence of our spiritual nature, when the gods had otherwise laid waste to our world?

More images came back to me from the vision,... Gruber's palms flat upon the table, a man concealing his cards. Words: something about loving the one and possessing them, while learning how to love another without possession. Meanwhile, Gruber, the real Gruber, sat in the shadows watching, the light of a lantern catching the amber swirl of brandy in his glass as he toyed with it. He looked younger, the flickering lantern-glow wrapping him in an ever more mysterious air. His eyes gazed out, as if upon worlds unseen. Then he caught me looking, and with the faintest of smiles acknowledged me.

Gabrielle's steps faltered. She drew to a halt and leaned heavily against me, sleepy-tired. “I will go up now, Richard,” she said. “We've had quite an adventure these past days.”

“Yes,... we'll go.”

“No,... stay a while and talk to Herr Gruber. He looks,...”

“Mysterious?”

“Lonely. He puts on his brave face, as always, but he is human and fears to fail. Unlike you and I however, he cannot admit it. Also,... he knows more than he is telling. Hopefully he is tired as well and will let something slip.”

“But,... I was sitting with Gruber during my vision. And you'd gone up to your room.”

“It is still different. Look,... Bernadette is dancing with Anton, not Heinrich, and my parents are not around to shoot you.”

“All right then. Half an hour?”

“An hour. I want to make a surprise for you.”

“Okay, an hour. No more. What kind of surprise?”

“Wait and see.” She kissed my cheek, then walked away. I caught the scent of her drifting in her wake, as she departed – something hot and honeyed. I felt a flutter of panic, and I prayed it would not be the last time I saw her. Gruber watched me watching her and when I caught his eye he beckoned for me to approach his table.

It was true, what she'd said; he couldn't be seen to falter. At such times as these the simplest of things can make all the difference, like the steadiness of a man's gaze inspiring faith and calm and order. She was also correct in her belief that he knew more than he was telling.

“You dance well, Mr. Graves. But please, you mustn't keep your lady waiting. Compared to Mademoiselle Lafayette, I am dull company, surely?”

“Your company is anything but dull, Herr Gruber.” I settled beside him, drummed my fingers upon the table in order to gather courage, and then I asked him: “How will you defend La Maison?”

He looked blank for a moment, as if he really had not considered it, then he took a deep breath. “First with polish,” he said. “and when that fails, with words. And when words fail,...”

“With guns?” I suggested, cynically.

“No,... I was thinking about what you said, about the possession of guns as a deterrent, being the fatal delusion of all weapons. No,... when words fail, we must resort to subterfuge.” He smiled. “There is no such thing as defeat when you are defending something you believe in. If we are overrun by barbarians then they defeat themselves. In overrunning La Maison, you see, one inevitably destroys its real value. The buildings, the gardens, the rooms, these things remain the same of course, but what is it that gives La Maison its meaning?“

“Ah,.. *meaning. The people, I suppose?”*

“Yes,... but with the people there must also be a sense of order, of polish. You understand?”

“But so often appearances are deceptive. Modern corporate culture has mistaken appearances for substance. If you scratch the surface of

these places you find unhappy people toiling as wage-slaves amid chaos, while their bosses grunt at the swill trough of conspicuous consumption. There is no meaning in that at all."

"But a polished veneer cannot cover an empty shell for long. It will always fail, crack, splinter. However,... a sense of order, structure, a certain pride,.. such things can grant sustenance to the spirit instead of crushing it. Tell me does it matter that our shoes are clean? Does it matter that they shine?"

"Yes,... yes, I think so. It's good to make an effort, to take the time to brush away the dirt. In practical terms it makes no difference of course, but a clean pair of shoes has a steadying effect upon the psyche – you'll forgive my homespun philosophy. Jung would have put it better, I think."

He nodded approvingly. "I knew you'd understand. Life's meaning has no name. We think we might understand it, if we can only give it a name, but that is the one thing we can never do. If we can only resist the temptation to name it, the meaning of everything is very simple because we each carry an instinctive knowledge of it in our hearts. I have seen the young, and the not so young, sit at the tables in this room in their jeans and tee-shirts. In doing so, the room speaks to them in a certain way. But you and I, and Gabrielle, and the Lafayettes and the De Lucas,... we formalise it, and the room speaks differently."

"The meaning of life in a shiny pair of shoes?"

He laughed. "Why not? Is it so very strange? Your Aldous Huxley found it in the weave of his trousers, did he not?"

"But wasn't he stoned at the time?"

Gruber thought for a moment, and I felt a quietness about him as he changed tack. "He stayed here once, you know?"

"Huxley?"

"No, Jung."

"He did?"

Infuriatingly, Gruber changed tack again, perhaps deliberately in order

to lodge this piece of information in my head. “Tell me, have you thought any more of checking out?”

“No, we've decided that, if necessary, we shall become your last guests and man the barricades with you.”

“And save one bullet each for yourselves?”

“If we must. But it won't come to that. Europe hasn't completely disintegrated. Someone is still running the power stations - struggling at the moment, obviously - but I trust things will improve. Lines of communication are being re-established. The BBC tells us so. I believe I can even get a train from Zurich to Paris now. Soon the channel tunnel will reopen. We must be patient. And we must remember that Gabrielle and I saw only two bandits this morning.”

“Yes, yes,... I'm sure you're right. After all, you have more experience of these matters than you openly admit to.”

What did he mean by that? “Herr Gruber?”

“This disintegration of normality, of basic security. Civil unrest.”

“I'm not following you.”

“You were a child, Mr. Graves, at the height of the troubles afflicting your own country.”

“How did you know that?

He smiled. “As I said before, you have a Wikipedia entry.”

“And why do I get the feeling it's you who's been writing that entry? No one knows anything about that, not even my closest friends.”

He shrugged innocently. “It's the duty of any good hotelier to know his guests.”

“You're unlike any hotelier I've known before, Herr Gruber.”

“I take that as a compliment. But am I not correct?”

“But that was different,” I said. “That was sectarian.”

“Is all violence not the same?”

“No,... not at all. You have to ask yourself what myth underpins the violence. In those days,... we're talking the nineteen seventies here, Belfast – that was a myth that had us mistaking our brothers for our enemies. It was Mars who wrote that myth, or Ares possibly. But this,... this is quite different. I don't know who's writing this myth. Do you? This isn't coming out of the hearts of men – but from the ground beneath our feet and even the sky above us. This is reality itself, Herr Gruber. Reality is changing, disintegrating.”

Gruber sighed. “Perhaps Herr Jung would have an answer?”

“Yes, I'm sure he would. You said earlier that Jung *actually* stayed here?”

“That's correct. It was before my time of course. It would have been,... oh, in the nineteen fifties I suppose. There was a conference, I think. La Maison has played host to many a celebrated personality over the years. Most of them less intellectually endowed I'm sad to say than Herr Jung. And speaking of intellectuals, did I spy you talking with Monsieur Lafayette this afternoon?”

Another sideways tack. What was he doing? “Yes,... we seem to have arrived at an understanding. He even suggested I take Gabrielle with me to England, anything, so long as I get her away from here. It was most,... unexpected.”

He nodded approvingly. “And Madame Lafayette?”

I gave an involuntary shudder. “I've not seen her since we were on the mountain.”

He sighed. “Yes,... alas, it is the mother you must be careful of. There is something disturbingly combative about her. She has by far the bigger and the more belligerent ego of the two. If anything it will be she who will be your undoing. Of all the deities in the pantheon it is the female ones who are the more irrationally vindictive. Unless?”

“Unless?

“You can find some grounds for kinship between you.”

“Kinship?”

“You must find a way of making her your sister, Mr. Graves.”

“Are you crazy?”

He paused as if to seriously consider the question. “I don't think so. There is a solution to your estrangement with this woman. You must find out what it is, and act upon it.”

“Why should I? She's nothing to do with me.”

“Can you and Gabrielle really think of hiding from her, for the rest of your lives?”

“Why not?”

“Oh,... it's the easiest thing for you to do, I grant you, but so undignified, don't you think?”

“Is there something you know, that you're not telling me, about Madame Lafayette?”

He wiggled his fingers dismissively. “I'm simply thinking out loud, Mr. Graves.”

It was like listening to the daemon in the vision again, the Lafayettes being mirrors of my own egotistic tendencies. I had recognised myself in Gabrielle's father and so begun the healing process, but her mother? I could find no way of relating to her at all, no clue in anything she said or did.

“And you tell me Gabrielle refuses to leave La Maison?” he went on.

“Only when the emergency is over. And then we shall drive away one morning with the freshness of the road ahead of us, rather than being evacuated in a military helicopter like a couple of refugees.”

Gruber's eyes slid away and fastened themselves upon the rim of his glass as he sank deep into thought. Then, slowly, he shook his head. “I cannot allow it, Mr. Graves.”

“You can't allow what?”

“Gabrielle must survive at all costs, yes?”

“Of course, but you'll never get her onto a helicopter with her parents, unless she's drugged first. But we're worrying unnecessarily. La Maison will not be over-run. And order *will* be restored. It's simply a question of time.”

“Yes, yes. I'm sure you're right.” He sighed. “But still,...if you'll forgive me, I must go. The telephone lines are quieter at this time of night. There's more chance of establishing a connection. I must speak with Monsieur Lagrange, and see if we can place a call.” He stood slowly, stiffly, still in thought, then reached out and snuffed the candle with his fingers. Before he went he looked over to where Bernadette and Anton were still dancing.

“Bernadette's wristwatch,” he said. “Have you noticed it yet?”

“Cartier?”

I knew it was a Cartier,... but Gruber's raised eyebrow underlined the fact that I'd not yet grasped the deeper meaning of it. It came to me slowly. It was obvious really: “It's running,” I said. “Bernadette's watch still works.”

“Exactly.”

I thought back, and couldn't remember seeing her with a watch before. “And,... a Cartier,... It must be worth a fortune. It's not the sort of watch a waitress would normally wear, surely?”

“Ah,... your Inspector Grantley whispers this in your ear. It's rather an old watch though, Inspector.”

“It makes no difference with a watch like that. They gain value over time, they don't lose it. Herr Gruber,... did you give her that watch?”

He shrugged. “I had no use for it.”

“Then,... what do you mean by it?”

“I mean, Mr. Graves, that I wish her to play a more prominent role in your story. You need not be so pessimistic, you know? I have great hopes for you and Mademoiselle Lafayette. You are full of surprises.

Surely, a happy ending is not beyond your reach. I therefore trust that anyone close to you in your story, anyone with a ticking watch, will share in your good fortunes."

He left me then, and I was about to rise, to make for the exit myself, when Bernadette came to me. Anton had slipped away to attend to the generator. It had begun to falter again, causing the lights to waver in and out. I was suddenly nervous, looking for ways to escape her.

"I have not offended you I hope, Mr. Graves?"

"Offended me? Don't be ridiculous."

"I,... I thought perhaps I had."

"Nonsense,... no,.. you could never do that."

She brightened. "Oh,... I'm so glad! Will you dance with me then? I was so happy when you and Mademoiselle returned this morning. I did not sleep all night, thinking you might be lost,..."

"We were quite safe."

"But this is not what I have heard,... armed men in the woods. It's so frightening. I had thought La Maison the safest place on earth."

"It still is," I told her,... "I'm sure of it."

She seemed so ingenuous, so trusting, it was ridiculous I should want to escape her and run the risk of upsetting her even more. So, I stood and took her hands, held them for a moment, pressed them, stroked the backs of them with my thumbs, while I looked into her eyes. "The world is very strange, Bernadette. And I don't know what anything means any more,... but I will always,...." I faltered. How much of this could she understand? How much did she risk misunderstanding? Dared I tell her she could rely upon me, for anything? That I loved her. And what would Gabrielle say to that?

With a twist of her wrists, she moved her hands to the outside, so that she was now holding and squeezing mine. "Just dance with me, sir?"

So we danced as the lights wavered in and out, and the music slowed and speeded up. The room was empty now, but for the two of us and it

seemed an indulgence, or worse, a dangerous indiscretion, though neither of us meant anything by it.

Through the doors I could see the reception area where Gruber now stood in conference with Lagrange. They were trying the telephone, trying to get a connection. There was an air of dogged determination about them and though they'd plenty to be desperate about – guests to look after, no revenue coming in, intermittent power and dwindling stocks of food – I felt perfectly safe in their hands, as if they were bound to magic up a solution at the last minute.

I glanced at the Cartier as it glittered on her wrist.

“A lovely watch, Bernadette.”

“Yes,... Herr Gruber gave it to me this morning. He is so generous.”

“Have you any idea what it's worth?”

“I imagine such things aren't worth anything now. Certainly not beyond the price of a bottle of clean water, or an hour's electricity. But still it is all the world to me, even though I suspect he bought it for a lover years ago, someone who left him before he could give it.” She giggled. “He is a man of mystery, and dubious reputation, but we adore him.”

“You mustn't lose it, you know? And you must always wear it, do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Even if it isn't on your wrist, you must loop it through your belt and wear it on your hip. All right?”

“Oh,.. but Anton,... he is very strict about our uniforms. He will say it is untidy.”

“In your pocket then.”

“But I may scratch it.” She was teasing me, waiting for my next move so she could object to it. But when I was quiet, she suggested: “I could loop it on a chain around my neck and wear it under my blouse?”

At the mention of her blouse, I brought the dance to a gentle close. It

had been an hour now. The daemons were provoking me, and it was time to return to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle waited, a candle burning at the bedside. I found her wearing only the shirt I had changed out of before dinner. She'd turned up the collar of it and was holding it to her nose as if to savour my scent. I felt myself dissolve a little at the thought of this, that any woman could have developed so intense an attachment to me that she would take pleasure in such a thing. Seeing me she smiled. Then she unbuttoned the shirt before revealing herself slowly.

I was amazed. “What have you done?”

She'd taken a pen and had written all over herself, on the curve of her shoulders, the swell of her breasts, her arms, her thighs, her belly, anywhere that had come easily to hand. The writing was neat, the lines even - short paragraphs that followed the contours of her body like a lover's caress. I drew nearer and realised the lines were from our story. The journal was by the candle. She'd evidently been copying parts of it and writing them out on herself.

She gave a girlish shrug. “I was bored,” she said dismissively, as if worried I'd take this only as evidence that she had truly lost her mind. But there was great deliberation and meaning in what she had done. Far from being an abuse of her beauty, it seemed instead the most perfect adornment, also deeply erotic,... at least to me.

“Richard?”

“You have,... the most beautiful handwriting, Gabrielle.”

She was relieved I was happy to enter into her game; she had clearly taken a chance on it. “Then come to me,” she said, “and kiss your words. Bless them with your lips, as I have already blessed them with my hands.”

She was so beautiful, every curve of her, and I feared to touch her so that as we lay upon the bed she had to take my hesitant hand and place it upon her sex, then curl my fingers round so they slipped into her lovely folds, and I could tell how ready, how moist, how desirous she was,..

This was written upon her mound of Venus, which she'd shaved clean

for the purpose. I was struck by its pale nudity, having grown accustomed to her masses of coppery curls. I was deeply moved, as in doing this she seemed to have revealed a deeper part of herself, a thing normally covered.

It was the last place I remember kissing, before the night dissolved into a blur of heated passion, and of aching sex. Afterwards I lay stunned and deliriously happy in my semi-consciousness, basking in her heat, and in the weight of her as she sprawled across me. For all I knew the whole of Europe lay to waste around us, and I cared nothing for it. I felt invulnerable. But then a thought came to me, whispered into my mind's ear by a mischievous daemon, and it was this: that there was nowhere on Gabrielle's body where Bernadette's name could be written, nor what that name could ever mean,... to us. Yet it had clearly begun to mean something to me.

Chapter 32

In the morning, we were roused by an urgent rapping on the door. It was not yet six thirty. I rose groggily, threw on a robe and went to answer it. I was vaguely aware that it was now a week since I'd arrived at La Maison, and ordinarily I would have been checking out that morning. I'd arrived with such fixed ideas, filled with hope for the rescue of my floundering psyche, but also weighted down by the dross of decades of self obsession. Now the world had changed, ceased to exist in many ways, and I could only define myself by the fact that I was alive, that I breathed,... and that I was with Gabrielle.

“Bernadette?”

She looked nervously over her shoulder, then squeezed past me and entered the room. She smelled fresh, her uniform crisp and starched as always, though she was breathless and pale. Gabrielle had gathered the duvet about herself for modesty, and had come out of the bedroom to see what the fuss was about.

She spoke to us in an urgent whisper: “Please you must dress quickly. There are policemen downstairs.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “But,.. this is good is it not? We can tell them what happened at the farmhouse,... that there are bandits.”

“Oh no, Mademoiselle. They are not interested in such things. They have come looking for cars to commandeer – old cars like yours Mr. Graves, and Herr Gruber's.”

“I'll be damned if they're having my car.”

“But this is not all. Madame Lafayette has spoken with them, and now they are looking for *you* sir.”

“But,... that's nonsense. Surely they've better things to do than waste their time with ridiculous allegations.”

Gabrielle looked at me puzzled. “Allegations, Richard?”

“Your mother,.. she threatened me with the police if I didn't stay away

from you. She accused me of taking advantage of,... of your condition."

She stared at me uncomprehendingly: "My *condition*?"

"Please," urged Bernadette. "There is no time. I must take you to the pavilion. You must hide for a little while. Gunther is waiting there with a boat." She eyed our embarrassment, then said. "I will be outside the door while you dress. Please hurry."

Haunted by Bernadette's baleful eyes, we dressed, crammed whatever lay to hand into the rucksacks, then found ourselves trotting along the carpeted upper corridors of La Maison in order to make good our escape – though from what exactly, I could not tell. Then it was down a criss cross of back stairs and labyrinthine passageways usually frequented only by the staff, eventually to emerge in the courtyard, at the back of the hotel, by the garages.

I was alarmed to see my car with its bonnet flipped, and a VW bug parked beside it. It had the words Polizei hastily sprayed upon its doors and roof. There was a trail of jump leads, and a scatter of jerry-cans, also a stink of petrol. Of Gruber's Porsche I could see no sign, but they could not have taken it because I still had the rotor arm, along with that of the MG, in my pocket, and they weren't having either of them.

The MG was my last resort. It was a leap into the unknown perhaps, driving away from here, but Gruber had been right last night, and it shocked me only now, the gravity of it: *all that really mattered was that Gabrielle survived*. If that meant a mad drive across a benighted Europe with a revolver in my glove-box, and the police on my tail, as well as the whole of the continent's opportunist banditry, then so be it!

But it would never come to that, surely?

The gardens and the lake were overhung with a dense and sluggishly drifting drifting mist, so we had little difficulty in evading detection as we fled across the lawn. Gruber had decided it was better to avoid the police for now and to let him speak on our behalf, claiming innocently that we had merely gone for a walk and would be back shortly, that our relationship was entirely consensual, that so far as he was concerned Gabrielle was a mature woman, perfectly sane and perfectly capable of choosing her own company - that we were engaged to be married for Heaven's sake - that it was Madam Lafayette who was behaving as if she were mad.

“Better to explain all of this though,” said Bernadette, “in your absence. Otherwise they might be inclined to drive you away for questioning.”

“They're not interested in the bandits in the woods?” I said, exasperated. “But they're interested in *me*?”

“They would need to chase the bandits, sir. You, they already have. Or at least they would, if I had not led you away from them.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “You see Richard? How easy we are? How obliging? We are better off out of this world.”

She was thinking of the lights again, of walking into one, of escaping this reality, swapping blithely it for another. But this reality was becoming crazy enough. What if the next one was even worse? This was speaking hypothetically of course. The most likely outcome of stepping into a light remained immolation, or hopefully vaporisation, as the latter promised a less lingering end.

Bernadette went on: “They have their procedures to follow and policemen are not renowned for their interpretation of rules. But trust me Herr Gruber would never have permitted them to take you.”

But what could Gruber have done to prevent it? Was he above the law? What could he do when faced with the sudden intrusion of authority? I suppose he would do what he'd been doing all his life. He'd resort to a beguiling smoke screen while pulling all manner of Machiavellian strings under the cover of it.

We arrived at the pavilion. The water level was still too high even to wade out to it, but there was no need; Gunther appeared, an eerie vision, cowled like a sinister Charon, come to ferry us to the underworld. It was a strange vessel, built of heavy wooden planks, long and low and with a platform at the rear on which he stood, operating a single paddle, by which he managed to perform both steering and propulsion. Gabrielle and I paused at the sight of him, turning simultaneously to Bernadette for reassurance, for surely one so sweet as she would not condemn us to a passage from which there was no return.

“It's all right,” she said. “There is an annex, on the island. It is not well known. Gunther will take you there. It will only be for a short time. I will come and get you when the coast is clear. Now go. Hurry!”

So we stepped aboard the boat and Gunther, without so much as a nod of greeting, pushed off. Then he navigated us out into the mist and the safety of obscurity.

I could not recall ever seeing an island in the lake but supposed it must have blended into the opposite shore, it being similarly wooded - that it was an illusion of sorts. Gabrielle crouched low and hugged herself, her brow furrowed. “This is strange,” she said, casting Gunther a suspicious look. “I do not like it, Richard.”

I put my arm around her and she folded herself trustingly into my embrace. “We'll be all right,” I said, and then: “I'm sorry. I should have told you before, what your mother said to me. I know it's all lies. I just can't believe she'd say such a thing.”

“Well,... it was true, for a short time. After the court case, I went into a very dark place, and I was declared,... incompetent? Is that the right word?”

“I understand. Yes.”

“It sounds dreadful, I know – to be legally insane – but it was a technicality to allow others to manage my affairs for a while. And it was only for a short while. I am declared competent again, trust me.” She paused for a moment of self reflection. “Not that this has made much difference to me,” she went on. “I had grown used to having my parents do everything by then - handle my affairs, my money, shield me from the occasional attentions of men. My mother even bought my clothes, like I was a little girl. I had so little self respect, so little self belief you see? Perhaps it's no surprise I could do little else but drift along, the same sad, mad Gabrielle? But then I saw you looking at me, Richard. I know you said I was projecting something from inside of me onto you, that I do not really know you, but for all of that, seeing the way you looked at me, I realised how very much I wanted to be a woman again.”

“They have no legal power over you, Gabrielle. You can do as you please.”

“I know. But having the right, and having the will to exercise it are not the same thing. And the will has been such a long time in coming. As to legal powers, you are right. My mother conveniently forgets this, and speaks above herself. She does it all the time. I think it suits her to have a cross to bear, you know? She can be very dramatic. She can

also still make trouble for us. Gruber was wise to send us into hiding, until she calms down and the police have gone away." She gave me a wry smile. "Strange, isn't it? That I should have found the will to live again, just as the world is coming to an end."

"The world's not ending,... it's just changing."

"But not for the better."

"Oh, I don't know. Since meeting you, my world's changed for the better."

"You will have plenty of time to reconsider that statement." She shook her head in contemplation of something dark. "Where are we going?"

"An island,... an annex, Bernadette said."

She hugged herself. "I do not like it."

"We'll be all right."

"But think about it, Richard; this puts us very deep into Gruber's pocket, and we cannot climb out now unless he allows it. It takes away our options. Before, we had the car, now we have nothing. Why can we not hide somewhere else?"

"This is probably the safest place."

"How do we know?"

"Gruber wouldn't have suggested it otherwise."

How Gunther found his way in the mist I don't know. He navigated without compass, and after some thirty minutes delivered us unerringly to a wooden jetty, its boards a few inches below the lake's surface, so that we had to take off our shoes and wade ashore. As soon as we were out of the boat he left us there, so by the time I turned, hoping to catch his eye, he was already several yards out, oscillating his paddle with a slow, rhythmic movement. He did not look back.

I called out to him, but either he did not hear or he was too taciturn to be bothered, and in any case I don't know what I would have said. If it was reassurance I sought, I knew not to expect it from Gunther.

Instead I looked around for a clue as to what we should do next. There was a flight of stairs cut into the rocks, ascending steeply through dense pines. Gabrielle took a breath and shouldered her pack.

“It's up here, I suppose.”

We climbed about a hundred meters, the way being initially quite unassuming - a little rough, a little overgrown - though by degrees the path took on more of a clipped and cultivated appearance. Ahead, through the trees there lay a strip of clear sky, and, gaining the last of the steps, we emerged onto a lawn bordered by walled gardens and ornamental trees,... and before us rose the extraordinary annex of La Maison.

It was of a very different design to the hotel, consisting of four modern apartments, like square section tubes, glazed at their open ends and arranged at right angles to each other around a tiled courtyard, with an azure pool glittering at their centre. Each annex overlooked the pool at one end, and a different aspect of the lake at the other. They were aligned in the cardinal directions and were of a split level, the upper storey of each possessing a balcony. The lake-facing balconies let on to dreamy views.

The apartments were each covered with an apparently seamless zinc panelling that had by now weathered to the colour of a stormy sky and this blended with the rocky outcrops of the island. This seamlessness and the sharpness of their lines, uncluttered by the usual paraphernalia of drains and downpipes and aerials, lent the place an uncanny feel, both futuristic and nostalgic at the same time. The effect was softened only at close quarters by the honey coloured tiling that framed the pool. It puzzled me that such a structure with its stark geometry was invisible from the shore.

The uncanny feel was heightened by the silence of the place,... but the silence was not restful, not reassuring,... indeed it was unsettling. Neither of us knew what to make of it. It was as if the place, modern though it was, had not been lived in for centuries.

“I'd no idea,” said Gabrielle. “I have been coming to La Maison for as long as I can remember,... but I never suspected this,...”

"It's like something from a sixties science fiction movie,"

“Something not quite real, perhaps?”

“Exactly. “

There was a level of luxury here that surpassed even La Maison and I wondered what celebrated personalities and their hangers on had spent time in such avant garde surroundings? What august heads of state, or crowned princes?

Gabrielle gazed longingly at the pool. “I think I am prepared to make the best of things,” she said, with a smile.

“A moment ago you were suspicious.”

“I still am. But what else can we do? Which apartment shall we choose do you think?"

"Is it worth settling in to that extent? I was thinking we'd be off the island by tonight at the latest – I mean the police must have other things to attend to. They won't be that long surely.”

She gave a shrug. "The pool is very inviting, and we will need somewhere to rest after our swim."

"You can think of swimming at a time like this?"

She smiled. "Why not? You would rather we waited with our fingers knotted while they come for us?"

“But if we're undressed when Bernadette comes, and we have to move quickly?"

"So many excuses, Richard! She must wait until we are dressed. We are guests remember, not fugitives."

"And if it's the police who come?"

"What does it matter? From here there is nowhere to run. I am going to swim. Perhaps you could see if you can find towels?"

Before I could reply she was opening her blouse, her hips swaying, her body impatient to be out of her clothes and to feel the caress of the water. Even now, amid danger, she was able to tease me with her

body, brighten my spirits with a cheeky wink, revealing paragraph after paragraph of our story, written upon the folds and the swells of her flesh. It was a timely reminder that without her, I had no story. And so long as she was like this, so long as she was free, what possible harm could befall us?

I gave in, gladly. "I'll see what I can do. Be careful."

I watched her push herself out, a fleshy dart, into the middle of the pool, then I turned to the nearest of the apartments and began to explore.

The interiors were of varnished pine, open plan, and had a hollow, echoing feel to them like something not lived in. The lower deck consisted of a large sitting room with plain furnishings, which blended seamlessly into a steel and granite kitchen. The upper deck, accessed by an eerie glass staircase, that lent one the feeling of walking on air, consisted of a bedroom and study area - a wide bed, double king-size at least, and an enclosed bathroom - luxuriously appointed, where I found a generous number of towels and towelling robes.

From the upper deck, I stepped out through sliding glazed doors onto the balcony and looked upon the lake. The view was framed by a clearing in the forest which rose to left and right, so that the section of lake I could see was limited. It was the forest that must have disguised the outline of the apartments, I reasoned, blurred their squareness, their angularity, though I still could not believe it and vowed that if I ever made it back to the shore I would stand all day with binoculars until I'd spied these windows. *If I ever made it back? What was I talking about? Of course I'd make it back.*

A mist still lay upon the water. It was thinly layered, so that from the balcony I could gaze out across it to the opposite shore. I thought I recognised something then - a splash of terracotta perhaps and luminous green. I had the field glasses in the bag, so I pulled them out and was able to focus them upon the roof of the pavilion. Jutting clear of a boiling sheet of vapour, it looked impossibly far away and suddenly it worried me - this isolation. Gabrielle was right, our choices had suddenly narrowed to zero. We relied entirely upon the staff of La Maison. There would be no checking out from here, not even as a last resort. Were we still Gruber's guests? Or were we his prisoners now?

I had to remind myself why I was there. The police had come looking for vehicles they could hot-wire. It was important they could get about,

I supposed, restore order, prevent the petty lawlessness Gabrielle and I had witnessed. And upon seeing the police, Madame Lafayette had complained of the defilement of her emotionally unstable daughter by a totally unsuitable Englishman. She could not have done this out of a mother's love, or she would have been more discrete. Rather it seemed she had done it out of vindictiveness, as if Gabrielle were a possession,... and like the journal, I had dared to deprive her of it.

And the police? Why had they not better things to do than investigate such an obviously petty distraction? I could not fault Gruber's logic. It was better to avoid the last vestiges of the legal system and police procedure, lest we found ourselves trapped in it, held in limbo indefinitely while it all collapsed around our ears; better we lay low for a while until things blew over and renewed themselves.

While the system collapsed? Had I really said that? Was I not the one who had preached the early restoration of order? But it had shaken me, the sight of that old V.W. Bug, hastily commandeered, the mark of its officialdom nothing better than a botched paint-job. It was the first hint I'd had that there would be no restoration, only a permanent and ever accelerating retrogression. The voices of reason from the BBC had been no more than wishful thinking.

I went back inside and walked the length of the upper deck, to the opposite balcony which looked down upon the pool. The light in the courtyard was dramatically low, and had as yet the yellowy flavour of early morning. The honey-coloured tiles glowed warmly and the pool sparkled beneath a spotlessly blue sky - a deep blue, the blue of late summer. Oblivious, Gabrielle swam underwater, arms stretched before her, legs flicking with a subtly powerful rhythm that propelled her effortlessly from one side of the pool to the other. She seemed able to hold her breath for minutes on end.

I could no longer see the writings on her body, and supposed the water had dissolved them. I wondered if she would permit me to write them anew and felt at once a powerful arousal at the thought of it. I had to shake my head clear, tell myself not to be absurd, that we were in trouble, and this was not the time to be thinking of such things.

Watching her I also realised how far I had come since that first night at La Maison, when I'd been unable to even think of getting involved with a woman. I remembered rambling on to Gruber about assimilating psychical energies of whose turbulence Gabrielle was but an indication, a symbol, a projection, and other such half baked

nonsense. I was embarrassed to learn of Jung's association with La Maison now. I could almost hear him laughing at my pomposity, at my inflated psyche, bristling with neuroses. Indeed if ever there was a case study in clueless psycho-babble, I was surely it!

No. I was being too hard on myself. I had gained ground; the world had dissolved and with it all my pretensions, all my old stories, so that by degrees Gabrielle had become my only point of reference in a universe grown exceedingly strange. Europe was in chaos - but I felt nothing of it. It had disappeared,... as too had La Maison, now, so that she and I found ourselves castaways in a new and even stranger environment. We alone existed. And though I knew it could not be for long, it was all that I needed, and I would treasure every moment of it.

So, I gave in to the seduction of the pool and swam with Gabrielle, and when the sun neared the meridian and the day grew hot, we put on our robes and sat out upon recliners, in the shade of a parasol. The sky had by now taken on the even deeper blue of the high mountains, yet the distant views of hills and forest remained smudged, as if no longer in focus. And the chaos of Europe seemed further away from us than ever, no more than an unconfirmed rumour.

“I wouldn't like to stay here,” I said. “The silence,... it's too much.”

“But do you not hear the lapping of the pool?”

“I hear it, but it sounds weighted, sluggish. I feel,... threatened here. I can't explain why. I wish we'd brought the guns.”

“We did. I packed them into my bag before we came. Also your book, our story. But don't think about the guns. Think only about the writing, *oui?* If we have time here, you must use it to write.”

“If only I knew where it was leading us.”

“But it's obvious, Richard.”

“Perhaps to you, my muse, it's obvious, but not to me.”

“It has led us here.”

“To what purpose?”

“To wait, and to be,... together. Does the presence of others not tire you? Does it not irritate you, the complications others have thrown in our path? Gruber? Anton, Heinrich,... the creepy Gunther, and this mysterious business with Bernadette? To say nothing of my parents. Here we will get to know each other,... properly.”

"I thought we already had."

"No, we have only begun,..."

By the middle of the afternoon, we'd grown hungry, but a search of the apartments yielded nothing. The fridges and freezers were empty, unplugged, and the larders were bare – not even a dry biscuit - so we retraced our steps to the jetty. I took the field glasses, thinking I might see La Maison, and whether or not Gunther had set out to rescue us from our exile. The water level had receded a little more, the boards of the jetty were clear and had already dried in the heat of the day. What puzzled us however was the large wicker hamper by the water's edge.

“Did we forget to bring it with us?” I asked.

“It was not here this morning, Richard. I am sure of it.”

Opening it, we found a supply of food – cooked meats, salads, vegetables, a selection of wines, a bottle of Gruber's brandy – even a few cigars, which I assume Gruber thought I'd acquired a taste for.

“This is unfortunate,” said Gabrielle.

“You mean it looks like they think we'll be here for a while?”

“Well that too. Judging by the amount of food, we're expected to be here for a few days, yes,... but there is not a change of underwear in this box, and we've only got the underpants we are wearing. Are we to go naked, do you think?”

“Why did they just leave the hamper? Why did no one come up and explain to us what was happening? Bernadette said she would come.”

Gabrielle shielded her eyes, gazed out at the far shore of the lake and sighed. We could make out the pavilion, a tiny structure in an otherwise natural landscape of lake and forest, with mountains rising behind. La Maison itself was hidden, tucked in a little further around

the bay. “Bernadette is a good soul,” she said. “And she will come if she promised. They must have sent Gunther with the hamper. You know what he's like. I don't think I've ever heard him speak. It is just like him to toss it ashore and row away.”

“You're right. I suppose we'd better get this lot up the apartment then, before it spoils.”

The hamper must have weighed in the region of twenty kilos, and it took us half an hour to drag it to the annex, pausing several times for breath en-route. By the time we regained the annex we were both sweating freely, Gabrielle, her décolletage slick and shiny, her shirt clinging. We flopped down by the pool, unable to make it indoors without one final rest.

"It's impossible," she said. "They cannot restock the annex larders like this every day?"

"I'm more worried they didn't send anyone with it."

She arched an eyebrow in jest. "You prefer to be waited on? You think we cannot manage between us to prepare a meal?"

"It's not that. You would have expected Gruber to leave word, but there's no note, nothing! How much trouble would it have been to leave a note?"

"As you are so fond of reminding me, my love, we have to trust him."

I opened the lid and pulled out Gruber's luxuries. "I've never cared for brandy or cigars, and I did not come here to be with a woman, but it seems that from my first night Gruber decided otherwise, decided that what I least believed I wanted was actually what I needed most of all."

I'd spoken without thinking - about not wanting to be with a woman. Gabrielle looked away, hurt. "And is he right?"

I realised my mistake and felt wretched. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I don't know about the brandy and cigars, Gabrielle. But the woman? The woman I cannot live without. That's what worries me about Gruber. He's always right. He may even be right about the brandy and cigars for all I know."

Her eyes were smouldering, exposing her vulnerability, betraying the immensity of the chance she was taking with me. I was, as always, self centred, seeing the universe only from my own perspective. Why would I not be any different to the others she had taken up with? Our situation was more elemental of course. We had not the life of the typical bourgeois European couple ahead of us. Indeed all we had for now were the contents of this hamper, and no certainties beyond it.

“I meant it,” I said. “I cannot live without you."

She relented finally, and warmed me a tender look. "I was not expecting it, that's all. I thought only to hitch a ride with you for a while."

"I know, but now we're engaged."

She gave me a sad sort of smile, then a shrug. "I will not hold you to it."

"Don't say that. I'm,... I'm an old fashioned sort of man, and these things still mean something to me."

“Like a shiny pair of shoes?” She placed a comforting hand on my arm. "For all we know there may no longer exist the institutions, or the laws to bind us in that way. Europe has other things to worry about now than lovers with their bedroom eyes, and dreams of any sort of future,... because there may be no future."

"Of course there's a future."

"Society was hollow at its core long before this happened. There is not the cohesion between the people who matter any more. Now there are only men with guns: soldiers and policemen and criminals, but they will all be the same in the world that is coming. They will all be men with guns. And then there's the rest of us."

“But we also have guns.”

“For now. But they do not really suit us.” She looked around. “Don't be fooled by this opulence. It is nothing but a relic. We have lost everything. There are no rules any more that can be relied upon, except the rules that will be used to oppress us. There will be a future, yes, perhaps, but we must get used to the idea that whatever it is, the

future will be a lot smaller than the one we imagined for ourselves.”

We heard the helicopter long before we saw it, the thwack of its rotors echoing from the mountains and making it impossible to tell which direction it would be coming from. Gabrielle grabbed her side of the hamper and urged me to help her drag it the last few yards indoors.

"It's better they don't see us," she said.

It came in low, over the lake, the wash of it's rotors vibrating the glass in the windows of the apartment. At first we were crouched upon the floor, hiding behind the sofa, but we realised at the same time how undignified this was, and instead we moved to the upper balcony in time to see the olive green tail of the monstrous machine vanishing from our field of view. It was passing low over the lake, heading in the direction of the hotel.

"Was it the same one?" she asked.

I couldn't be sure. "I don't know, but if it was why have they come back? It's only a matter of days since they were here last, and then we were told it might be weeks before they could return."

"“Perhaps, the soldiers have found a use for La Maison?"

"It's too remote from anywhere. What good are soldiers here?"

"I don't know, Richard. You said there were scientists as well, before?”

“Yes,...”

She shrugged. “I suppose it doesn't matter, at least for a while. Only if they interfere with us, with our purpose, does it matter.”

“Our purpose? I wasn't aware we had one.”

“Of course we have a purpose. It is to make love, to swim, to ponder the meaning of our circumstances, and to make the best of them.”

We emptied the contents of the hamper onto the kitchen counter, then took stock. There was food for three days, perhaps four if we were frugal. I should have been afraid, but found it exhilarating, being with her in that situation. There was a very practical rapport between us, as

if our instincts for survival were in tune and we were able to agree a plan, the essentials of what must be done, without any difference of opinion. But it was also her strength, her energy that reassured me. Free from the clutter and the petty conventions of the normal life, we had both *found* ourselves. The normal life had drained us, bled us into pale shadows of our potential selves, while this strange twilight world, this marginal zone had awakened our spirits, made us feel capable of taking on the world and changing it instead of being crushed by it as usual. It was a fantasy of course, but there was becoming less of a difference between fantasy and reality now.

We ate a simple meal of bread and cheese, drank a little wine, then sat up on the balcony to await developments. Gabrielle had washed her clothes in the bathroom sink, as had I, and we wore dressing-gowns while our garments dried on the balcony rails in what remained of the heat of the day.

I tried to write a little, but as yet the atmosphere of the annexe was still too unsettling for me to be at ease with my thoughts. Nor did I relish the prospect of spending the night there. "I'll never sleep," I said.

"My dear Richard," she purred, "I shall see to it that you do not."

My expression must have given something away.

"You do not want me tonight? Already as lovers we grow cold? I knew it, you English are so frigid. Give me a Frenchman for a lover any day."

"I fear only it's loss, Gabrielle."

“Then do not give in to your fears. Europe has gone to hell and left us in peace to be ourselves for a while. Rest assured though that what re-emerges will try to crush us, because people like us,... we cannot be allowed such freedoms as these for long."

"But what harm do we do?"

"We might infect others with the clarity of our vision. And then where would we be? We seek our freedom, and the time and the space to be whomever we choose to be. We hold up a mirror and show the world its ugly face."

"You're a philosopher Gabrielle. It clearly runs in the family."

"Ah,.. yes. Poet also: *They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had. And add some extra, just for you.*"

"You know Larkin?"

"And why not? It is my anthem that poem of his, as you might appreciate. But tell me, why is it my parents feature so prominently in our lives and yet yours do not?"

"Mine have passed away,... but,..."

"But?"

"It could be my anthem too, for different reasons. Your parents,... they smother you. They take your every dark look, your every cross word and translate it into a mental illness in need of analysis or Prozac. Mine,... I was the opposite. I rarely saw them - and at a time when I felt I needed them most, when I was a kid."

"Oh?"

"I spent more time in the care of distant relatives than with them. They,... sent me away, you see?"

"They,... rejected you?"

"No. They were protecting me. There's something you don't know about me."

"Oh? Now he says."

"I'm only half English, Gabrielle – on my mother's side. My father was Irish. I was born in County Antrim, that's in the north of Ireland. My dad took us to Belfast because he needed to find work. But Belfast wasn't a safe place in the seventies – or the eighties, or the nineties for that matter. Shooting, bombings,... it's hard to imagine it now.

"One Friday evening, after school, I was almost killed. If I'd not been late getting to the chip-shop, I'd've been inside of it when the bomb went off. Fifteen died that day. Most of them in the blast, some on the pavement outside, while I looked on – a mixture of relief that it wasn't me lying there, and guilt that I'd survived.

“Things seemed to be escalating - the violence - you know? It was out of control. So,... my parents did what they felt they had to do. I was sent to Manchester to stay with my mother's family – though ironically, the Irish nearly got me again, in '96. The whole city shook that day. Anyway, the accent in Manchester's infectious and I grew up with it. To a Mancunian, I'm still obviously Irish, But to a Continental European, like you I'm *obviously* English. But my point is I hated them, Gabrielle.”

“Who? The Irish?”

“No. My parents. They were protecting me, but I felt abandoned. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that sometimes the worst thing a parent can do in the eyes of a child is protect it.”

She thought for a moment. “No, Richard. It is not the same thing at all. Your parents,... their protection of you was heroic and self-sacrificing. I think you see that now. Mine,... it is cowardly, and possessive, and I can never forgive it.” She sighed. "So. Now I see you. You were always alone,... and always lonely - *oui, peut-être* - I understand it. You were always looking for a mother's affection in every girl you met in your adopted England, but never daring to find it. And your daring not to hope turns into a fear of it, then finally a defence against the very thing you crave. And you are already how old? But not yet married? How am I doing in my analysis of you?"

We'd not drunk too much wine, but spoke as if drunk, or high on something. "Close," I said. "Have you not considered a career as a psychiatrist? Do I look at all women as potential mothers? I'm not ashamed to say that to lie with my head upon your breast invokes the most sublime feelings in me. But when we face each other in the morning, it is not my mother I see."

"Then what? What do you see in me?"

"I see a woman who has chosen me. That's a terrifying prospect for a man. I will not let you down. On pain of death."

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

"Why will you do this for me. A woman you do not know?"

"Because I love you. And because you've allowed me into that most intimate part of you. And because I am a man, and because it is my duty."

"Ah,... *oui*, Richard,... this is a good answer. And the world? It can go to hell, yes?"

“The way I see it, the world has forgotten its gods, Gabrielle. I mean, what else are the daemons,... these dwellers of the unconscious?”

“You mean the world has forgotten how to pray, and now the gods are angry.”

“Yes. You put it well just now: we show the world its ugly face. Now we're in hiding from it. As for the gods themselves, we can only hope they're on our side.”

“Ah yes, and if they are not, then we must find a way to win them round.”

Chapter 33

That the helicopter had business at La Maison, other than urging the evacuation of its residents, was confirmed by the fact it did not leave that evening, and was still there the following morning. We knew this because we kept watch all night, Gabrielle and I taking turns on the balcony through until dawn, the one sleeping while other sat up with a loaded revolver, as much for comfort as any sensible precaution, for this is also the seductive allure of the gun.

For my turn, I watched from late evening through until midnight, Gabrielle in the cool, misty small hours, then I again until dawn. During both my watches, I wrote in the journal, catching up with the narrative of our story and reading it back in the hope it would highlight some small turning we'd missed along the way, something that would illuminate the path ahead. But even as I brought the story up to date, and pressed in the last full stop, I could conclude only that we'd had no choice in any of this, that this island, this strange annex with its mandala-like layout, this parody of the self, was where the story had brought us.

It was not an uneventful night. Balls of luminous energy appeared throughout both our watches, and were more active than usual. I counted four during my first watch, Gabrielle three during hers, and a further two during my last. Each was drawn to the defences of La Maison and ended, I presumed, in the partial vaporisation of one of the aluminium poles. Whatever the true nature of their end, each of them met it with a dull, shot-like report that reverberated from the surrounding mountains, and a flash of blue that momentarily lit up the misty night like a gaseous plasma.

It was as well we'd laid those defences, I thought, and I shuddered to think what such a charge would do were it to strike the helicopter filled with high-octane fuel. Gabrielle told me she'd heard what she'd surmised to be gunshots, which we hoped were merely ignorant soldiers taking aim at the spheres, and nothing more sinister. We also hoped they were amply rewarded for their lack of foresight. Her mistrust of soldiery had infected me, and I reflected grimly upon the

lessons of history, of how no civilian population had ever had much to thank the soldiery for, when they were deployed among us with their guns, for they do so only to protect certain interests to the detriment of others.

Gabrielle came to me on the balcony at dawn, sleepy eyed, with coffee, and we watched the sun come up together. It was fat, blood red, and blurred behind thin clouds. The shadows melted by degrees to reveal another day of mists, and the heat which had remained unabated throughout the night, looked set to continue.

"We should explore the island today," I said.

"Yes, and the other apartments." she added."There may be things we can scavenge." She laughed then. "We've not been here twenty four hours, but already I'm feeling like Robinson Crusoe." She laid her hand upon the journal, and with a flicker of her lids sought my permission to read it. She needed no permission of course, but I nodded anyway. So she drew the book towards her and, while I sipped the coffee, she read. Finally, she smiled, sat back and regarded me warmly. "You would like to write things on my skin?"

"Em,... I'd forgotten that bit. Yes. You touched a nerve with what you did. The erotic is a mysterious thing, is it not?"

"Ah,... *oui, bien sur* . And I think I would like it if you did that. But even if I did not like it, I could always pretend. What? You frown? But games are not only for children."

"I understand. But Gabrielle, I would never want you to pretend anything to me."

She tossed her hair playfully. "How do you know I am not pretending now?"

"Because I don't just hear you and see you any more. I also feel you. And I know you are not pretending."

"Ah, *oui , très bien* . I also feel you. Something strange is happening to us I think."

"But how do you know what you're feeling is correct? How do you know you're not simply projecting an unconscious need onto me?"

"You cannot trick me with that one any longer. I see through you Richard. After all how do *you* know? And does it matter? Is it not better if our unconscious binds us with these mysterious projections? If we relied solely on our conscious choice, on our rational senses, we would both have run a mile from each other long before now. What is attraction if it is not seeing one's compliment in the mind and the body of another? You speak as if it were a bad thing. But surely it is only bad if it is not mutual. But that is the way of all love, *n'est ce pas*?"

"But we might change as we grow, " I countered. "The unconscious is fickle. We might wake up one morning and find we no longer desire one another as we once did. You've suggested this yourself."

"Yes, but is that not also the way of love?"

I looked at her, beguiled by the warm glow in her eyes; teasing, flirting, testing, even then after such a weary night, and half of it kept watch against the monsters now lurking in our imaginations. She was a revelation, and had become the only thing now standing between me and the madness of the world.

The island was a mile in length, a half a mile in width and roughly equidistant by about a mile from the east and the west shores of the lake. North and south, the lake opened out into a breathtaking vastness, snaking around the jutting feet of the densely forested foothills of the Alps. When we set out to explore it that morning, we could see nothing of the mainland because of the mist, which confined our world to within a hundred yards of the island. The bit of the lake we could see lapped darkly upon the shore, warm and viscous.

Gabrielle knelt, scooped some water between her fingers and frowned. "It feels like blood," she said. "Black blood, as if spilled from some primeval monster."

I smiled at her dark musings, but she shook her head, refusing to have her spirits lifted: "Do you not feel it?"

"What?"

"Resentment,... it will have its revenge upon us, this dragon. You'll see!"

"Revenge? But what did we do?"

"We killed it, Richard. Long ago. We killed it, not because it was dangerous to us, but because we thought it was ugly, and its presence embarrassed us. You spoke of the Gods breaking through last night. I think you are right."

"It wasn't killed in my name."

She straightened herself and smeared the water upon her chest, vaguely in the shape of a cross. "Nor mine," she said. "Let us hope it remembers this, for then we might be spared. But I'm thinking they were not always benign, those old gods. Mars is indiscriminate, is he not? He lays waste to continents, murdering, raping both innocents and the corrupt alike. Is it Mars then, do you think who has done this to us?"

"This doesn't feel like Mars,.. it's not a war,... there's corruption, yes, disintegration,... but there's also something playful about it."

"Playful?"

"Yes, don't you think so? The lights,... this energy,... there's something teasing about it. It's,... Mercurial,..."

"And Mercury brings what?"

"Change. Transformation."

"But so does Mars with his wars."

"Mars lays waste. Mercury sublimates, transcends,... Mercury is the alchemist. He turns lead into gold."

"Which means?..."

"Nothing will ever be the same again, and only those who can transcend the old order,... ride the wave of change,... will survive it."

We found much of the island was covered with impenetrable coniferous forest which restricted our exploration to only a few pathways that always seemed to lead us back down to the lake shore. We surmised the island was circumnavigable via the shore, but for now the high water made it impassable.

The Eastern shore, the one that faced La Maison, proved fruitless, the pathways entangling us quickly in undergrowth and forest. The heat and the humidity were unbearable, and our clothes, only just cleaned and dried from the day before, were spoiled again before mid-morning.

On the western shore we had more luck. A path that was at first unpromising, eventually led us down to a bay in which there floated, upside down, a fibre-glass Kayak. Naturally, we seized upon it like the castaways we already imagined ourselves to be, plunging into the lake, waist deep, in order to ease the craft ashore. How it had come to be there in that state was a mystery. It was a broad, flat bottomed thing, inherently stable and would surely have taken a lot of rough water to upend. The hull was undamaged, and we confirmed this by tipping the water out on shore, then re-floating the Kayak. It slid over the surface with a reassuring ease, and even more reassuring it remained afloat while Gabrielle slipped gracefully aboard and tested it by rocking from side to side.

"It is good, Richard. No leaks. We need only some paddles now and the whole lake is ours."

We tested it for a while longer, plying it back and forth, gaining confidence in it, while a plan began to form in both our minds. We did not speak of it however, and the details were vague, but I could tell by the look in her eye as we dragged the Kayak safely ashore once more, we were both thinking the same thing. We did not speak of it because we both knew how desperate a plan it was, and also because it would be to admit that the magic of our time at La Maison was over, that for all of the gathering menace of recent days, La Maison was the only thing sustaining us, that beyond its boundaries we would be dissolved back into the banality of a Europe in decay.

“We'll need something to use as paddles,” I said.

"Yes, we must keep an eye out."

We hid the craft under cover of the forest, though from whose eyes I cannot imagine. We'd fallen foul of an unexpected paranoia now in which anyone who was not *us* was simply not to be trusted. We returned to the eastern side of the island and sought the jetty, in case Gruber had left word, but there was nothing.

Gabrielle frowned. "Something, prevents them from coming."

I was thinking there was only one fate that could have befallen La Maison that was worse than banditry, and that was armed officialdom. Or perhaps I inflated the possibilities in my mind. Perhaps Bernadette had already been set ashore with more supplies? Perhaps she was waiting in the apartment, the smart convention of her starched uniform conveying an air of security, banishing the eeriness. Perhaps even now her hands smoothed the sheets of our bed. Perhaps Gruber had come too, strolling nonchalantly up the path, in his white suit, to sit by the pool. There he would be - smoking a cigar, thinking, ready to greet us with some impenetrably philosophical observation.

No. We were still alone. We knew it long before we reached the annexe. We could feel it, like before, a sterile emptiness in the avant guard lines of the architecture. I wondered about the aspirations of the man who had dreamed up this monstrous statement. Had he truly meant to convey confidence? Had he meant to defy the laws of nature with the apparently impossible poise of the buildings, soaring without need of internal structure or foundation? But where were the people to enjoy it now? Who was there to lounge in its environs? All had gone; only Gabrielle and I remained, marooned here, and we shuddered at it's arrogance, the only ones with eyes to see.

Though the sky did not clear we felt the thinness of the mist above us and the fierceness of the sun beyond it. Mindful of our pale skins, we remained indoors for the hours either side of noon. The coolest place was the bedroom, so we peeled off our filthy clothes and showered together. It was reassuring that even before I stepped into the cubicle with her, I was ready for sex. Reassuring too was the way she smiled and responded to my alertness.

We made love in the cool light, she serene, reclining against pillows, guiding and nurturing my movements. I was already beginning to know her physical nature - the sensitivities of her erogenous zones, how much and in what way to stimulate them in order to assure her a throaty climax - her breasts, her fingertips, the insides of her thighs, how much to squeeze her derrière, how much pressure and with what frequency to time my strokes against the cherry-like bud of her ripening sex. But then she caught me in this calculated act, shook her head and pressed me into stillness.

"I want to feel the lightness of it, Richard. Climax will come when it is ready, and each time differently. Do not apply your formulas on me, or we shall quickly run out of ideas, *oui*?"

Of course it is not the certainty of the climax that is the symbol of human love, though it is often mistaken as such, and therefore we hesitate to risk anything that will not bring it about. I nodded in recognition, once more accepting the sterility of my old ways, my old stories, and turned over so that she might shower me with her less predictable essence, that she might show me by touch, and by example.

I trusted that to lose myself in her was the best in life any man might wish for. And for the first time in my life I made love without pause from noon till night, my attention rapt, so that it came as a surprise to find myself seated eventually at ease, my sex curled and dozing on my leg, a sliver of seed issuing upon my skin, beads of the same glistening upon Gabrielle's delicately crenellated folds.

Dusk had come on, and the air was cooler. I floated there, insensible, stunned by her beauty, by her presence, and in awe of her priceless neuroses that had cut clean through the unwholesomeness of the world and taught me that it was all right to *feel,* and to *be* this way.

She was unaware of me as she stared dreamily through the distant windows, into the deep well of herself. I watched her lashes beating slow time in harmony with the rise and fall of her breasts and I felt my heart swell with a mixture of joy and despair; joy that I could know such a moment as this, and despair that I would never truly know this woman, never experience enough of her, though we lived to be old and grey and gloriously tired.

The night air was comfortable on our skins. The mist had thinned and allowed a little light from the moon, which rode in midnight blue, a huge nebulous ghost, casting silver beams which glittered upon the thickly lapping waters of the pool. Gabrielle lay prone before me now, her chin propped upon her hands, serene, while I wrote selected paragraphs upon the curves and in the hollows of her nude form. She sighed at the touch of the pen, as if it were a lover's fingertip. Before her lay the journal from which she would dictate the paragraph she had chosen. Her skin still bore faint traces of the lines she'd written upon herself two nights ago, and which had been all but washed away by swimming, sweating and showering. The lines I wrote now would fade the same way of course, and in a sense they would have to be renewed every day, the changing paragraphs of our unfolding lives worn upon our skins with the reverence of love tokens.

"How many must there have been like us?" I asked. "I mean, down the

ages,... lovers who have touched the spiritual heights of sexual love?"

"What are you saying?"

"Countless,... lovers without number, who floated there for a while - since the dawn of time, since ever men had children - a man and a woman, floating, feeling the perfection of that moment."

She turned, curious now. "That's very poetic, my love, but your meaning?"

"Each must have felt themselves to be at the centre of the universe for a while, but then they die, their names unknown, names without number. They die in wars, in stupid accidents, die of old age, or starve on islands in the middle of a lake in a formerly civilised Europe,...."

"Our lives are pointless? Is this what you are saying? But Richard, all the rational philosophies of the old Europeans teach us this,... I had thought you were above them by now at least. Yes, there have been many like us. But are we not still the lucky ones? We will die too, yes; I don't know how, but this moment will not be lost. It will be lived again, and more,... by those who still believe in love, and who have the courage to follow us."

I closed my eyes in order to savour all the more this moment, then spoiled it by saying: "We have food for another day, then we begin to starve."

She reached up and stoked my cheek. "But really, my love, do you think it matters?"

There are worse ways to die, I thought, but still I should imagine it's a painful thing, starvation. We forget pain,... our lives so insulated from any adversities except the ones which, out of boredom, we invent for ourselves.

“Listen to us,” I said. “A few days alone and we're already talking like we're doomed.”

“I know. Our thoughts carry us away.”

“Gruber will come,” I said, as much for my own reassurance.

“Of course he will,” she replied, but I could tell she wasn't convinced either.

Chapter 34

The helicopter left at first light. We were asleep, a tangle of arms and legs and laundered sheets. The thwack of the rotors and the whine of it's engine stirred me from a place of deep contentment which I exchanged quickly for the resentment of the dragon whose black blood had been spilled to fill the lake that now confined us.

What did this mean? Had the few remaining guests of La Maison been evacuated to their safe havens? And what kind of civilisation could they expect? Little islands of normality, ringed by steel, the inhabitants cowering there, afraid to move, to roam? The Lafayettes would surely be among them now. If the western world was to be dominated by men with guns, then as Gabrielle's father had said, was it not better to be among those who were loyal to things other than themselves? Or was Gabrielle's the deeper insight, that to the unarmed innocents, guns were guns, whoever carried them.

Reluctantly I untangled myself from her and went out onto the balcony. There, I picked up the field glasses and swept them over the narrow slice of lake that was visible through the forest. It was a clear morning and I could see the shore, the pavilion, and even the wisp of smoke from a soldier's careless cigarette as he kept bored watch. The machine had gone, but had left behind men.

She came to me and slipped her arm through mine. "What do you see?"

"Soldiers."

She nodded. "Then the dream is over, and La Maison is already lost. It was not the bandits who took it after all, it was the state." She laughed. "Against the bandits we might have stood a chance. Richard, how reliable is your car?"

"Will it get us to England? I don't know. I'd say my car's reliability is the least of our problems. But you're thinking it might be worth the risk now?"

She sighed. "I think if we receive no word from La Maison this morning, then we should move the Kayak to the eastern shore of the island, and

make ready to cross under cover of darkness, tonight."

"Return to La Maison? But we don't know what's going on over there. And you were the one happy to settle in here,... "

“That was before we discovered the Kayak. Curious, don't you think? What do the gods mean by that?“

"These men are soldiers Gabrielle. We wouldn't stand a chance."

"I'm not thinking of introducing ourselves. We simply drive out. Fast. Perhaps the time has come for you to take me with you at last. If we stay here, without food, our choices are few."

"Okay."

She smiled. "You think me so reckless? I shoot a bandit in the arse and you imagine me capable of taking on the army as well? It was impulsive, I know but I am not the crazy woman my parents believe I am."

"You probably saved our lives that day. You live by instinct. I live too much by thought. But in an incomprehensible world, thought is of little use. All we have to go on are our feelings."

She raised an eyebrow. "You trust my feelings then?"

"Absolutely. However, if you'll allow me one last rational observation, there's no point in driving north into the new Europe, the new normality, or we might as well have accepted a ride on the helicopter, yes?"

"I suppose so. It makes no difference to me where we go. I have nothing outside of my parent's home,... nothing to lose, I mean, but you have a house,... it is worth something."

"Is it? Maybe like La Maison, there are no castles that they cannot take from us any more. I had money in the bank too, but does that exist now? Or did it disappear like my words, blown away by the solar wind?"

"Then it is what? South?"

"South is where things are still working, we're told: technology, infrastructure,..."

"Southern Italy, then?"

"Perhaps,... or Greece?"

"Greece? *Mais c'est tres loin d'ici*. Greece is very far Richard. Through the Balkans,..."

"I know, but it takes us a little further south than Italy,...as far south as we can settle, as European citizens. And if need be, the road can take us further, into the middle east."

"But from Italy, we can go to Sicily, then perhaps a boat to Tunisia,... then,..." she spread her arms,... "the whole of Africa is ours."

"Except in Africa and the Middle East we would be refugees."

"Have we not been refugees all our lives?"

She was right; there were indeed many kinds of refugee.

"I know people in Palermo," she suggested. "Not friends exactly, people from the movies, *tu connais*? Its legality is very grey of course, which means they know how to keep secrets, how to move secretly. They would shelter us."

"I'd make a poor porn star, Gabrielle."

She laughed. "I wasn't thinking that - only that they owe me money, enough I think that could be traded for a little kindness."

“Do you trust them?”

“Do I trust these people who promised me a short cut to Hollywood if I would only take my top off?” she wrinkled her nose. “What do you think? But they are not without compassion, and I think they would help us, if we do not expect too much from them.”

"Italy it is then." It made no difference to me. There were so many unknowns now, I couldn't bring myself to believe we'd get more than ten miles in any direction from La Maison.

"But we'll be going nowhere," she said, "if we don't find a paddle for our canoe."

"The chances are that canoe will sink before we even get half way across the lake."

"Ah, always the optimist. We tested it, remember?"

The collar of her blouse fell aside, allowing me a glimpse of the sentence I'd written there last night: *sometimes it is the bad ideas that change things for the better, non?*

She followed the line of my eye, and tried to read what I'd read, but could not. "What is it Richard?"

I'd been too distracted by the feel of the hollows and the swells of her skin as I'd written those words to ponder their meaning very deeply. Indeed I barely remembered writing them, and they appeared to me now as if by magic, as if spoken by an oracle, challenging me to just *do* something..

"Take no notice," I said. "The canoe won't sink. We'll be okay."

"But it would be the perfect mid-sentence ending would it not? Pointless, meaningless,... to have come through all of this, to drown in the middle of a lake? It would suit your view of life very well."

"I no longer see things that way."

"*Ah bien*, then I have served my purpose and you are transformed. So, we will do it! And we shall see."

It was true. I no longer believed in the mid-sentence ending for our story. I'd never liked the dry, despairing philosophies of the rational world. Gruber was right; I was too much of a romantic. I wanted to look at a tree, and see not how much lumber could be extracted from it, but the names of the spirits who dwelled in it.

As a precaution, we moved out of the east-facing apartment, and took up residence in the one opposite, the one overlooking the western shore. If there were soldiers keeping watch from La Maison, I reasoned they might have image intensifiers or even infra red equipment, in which case our presence would be easily detected, and

we did not want to draw attention to ourselves. The fact that they might spot us coming in our canoe even before we'd put it in the water was something we were both aware of, but chose to avoid discussing. Gabrielle seemed quietly assured we would be all right, now we'd settled upon the idea of flight, and I was happy to trust her, in spite of common sense which assured me of only the gloomiest outcomes.

For a while though we continued to enjoy our luxurious surroundings, breakfasting from Gruber's hamper, then swimming, and as the day warmed and the sun rose, we retreated to the shade of the balcony. Perhaps I should have felt more restless than I did, for soon it would be noon and we would be walking down to the jetty to see if there were any more supplies from La Maison.

We'd been marooned here such a short time, but already I could hardly imagine being back among the Edwardian grandeur of the hotel, of feeling myself safe and pampered by the uniformed staff, of playing that polite game of manners. We'd sustained it for much longer than was surely possible under the circumstances, but I was glad we had, for it had taught me the value of it.

At noon, we stood upon the jetty, the water levels back to normal. There was no hamper, nor any sign of a boat,... nothing except a sense of abandonment and the same eerie silence of the island at our backs, oppressing us. "They'll perhaps return after dark," I said. "After all it's stupid to assume they'll come by day and risk being seen by the soldiers."

"We're clutching at straws now, Richard. We're putting off the moment of decision."

"Okay, I admit, I'm afraid,... but maybe there's nothing to fear. It was the police we escaped from, not the army. Perhaps the police have gone now."

"It's encouraging to hear such optimism, Richard,... but something detains Gruber. It must be dangerous for him, and for us, or he would not leave us marooned this way." She shook her head thoughtfully. "You have kidnapped me," she went on. "This is what we must assume they are thinking. You have taken advantage of my mental disability and seduced me,... these are the questions you must answer. Policemen, soldiers,... they are all the same. They will have a procedure, whether innocent or guilty, and Gruber is right, we are better not getting caught up in it. At the very least they will separate

us." Her face darkened. "And if they try I will become violent,... I will show them then what a crazy woman is."

I still could not believe this was happening, that being with this woman could cause such a ferocious reaction in the world, as if the world was afraid of it, afraid of her. "After speaking with your father I thought we'd declared a truce."

"With my father, perhaps," she said. "But not my mother. My father is like you,... logical, rational. My mother is like me, instinctive,... a slave to her whims and her moods, and her petty jealousies. My father has no control over her. She will not even know he has spoken to you, and she will have poured poison into the ears of anyone who would listen."

"All right. It's time we left, but there's no point in dragging the Kayak over here when we can float it from the other shore, and paddle round the island."

"Okay. And if we land a little way off La Maison, a few kilometres south, they may not see us with their image intensifiers, *oui*? Come, let's search the other apartments. We still need to find a paddle."

In the north facing apartment, Gabrielle discovered a wardrobe of fresh clothing, and pulled the garments out in wonder, laying them on the bed in approval, but their owners clearly had nothing practical in mind. It was all dinner jackets, party dresses and exotic lingerie. She held one of the dresses against herself, a 50's style swing dress – black and white polka-dot. She gave her hips a shake and the dress flowed around her legs. "What do you think?" she asked.

I gave an approving nod. She looked stunning, and I lamented the fact that she would probably never have need of such a dress again – not in the world that had been half imagined and half described by the BBC, beyond the rim of the mountains. She held up a dinner jacket. "It looks about your size," she said. "Shall we dress for dinner?"

It was a ridiculous idea, and therefore, given our situation, it was perfect.

As we were leaving with our frivolous spoils, I noticed a cabin set back a little way in the woods. Inside were paints, basic tools and timbers. We'd found our paddles, I thought – or at least the means of fashioning them.

Later, we dressed in our costumes and consumed the last of our edibles in silence, then, still dressed like party-goers, we set off a little before dark, thinking we might at least be able to recover the Kayak in daylight and prepare it for the water. We found it without difficulty, set it down upon the shingle shore, nosed it part way into the lake, then sat together to wait for darkness.

I had the most terrible feeling about our plan now - that it would end in disaster, that we would be separated, that we would not make it to the shore, or if we did, we would be overpowered by the soldiers who now occupied La Maison. In the former option we would drown, in the latter we would not, but both were the same to me, for no matter how we were separated I could not bear to be without her. I reached out in the gathering dusk, and placed my hand upon her shoulder. "What are you thinking?" I asked.

She closed her hand over mine and breathed. "Ah,.. have I not warned you before about asking this question? Are you sure you want to know the answer?"

“I'm sure.”

“I'm thinking that whatever happens, Richard, we must pray we never find normality again. The gods,... they are chaotic, irrational. If Mercury is among us, we must live like him, you and I. Then perhaps he will mistake us for one of his own, and we will survive what is coming."

As she spoke, a luminous mist drifted into view, far across the lake, except it was not a mist, it was,.. I don't know what you'd call it - a flock, I suppose. It moved like a flock of birds, or a swarm of bees, swirling, rising, falling, but generally holding to the surface of the water. It was composed of a myriad of tiny luminous spheres, moving like a swarm, and therefore seemingly intelligent.

I trained the glasses upon them, mystified, mesmerised. They moved quickly, with a lithe energy. Gabrielle stood and walked down to the water's edge to watch them more clearly. "What strangeness is this?” I heard her say. “I thought we'd seen it all by now."

They were heading north, following clockwise the shore of the lake, but before we could gather our wits, a small swarm of lights had broken away from the main body and with staggering speed, engulfed us, or rather they engulfed Gabrielle, who was suddenly surrounded by a swirling mass of them. They were like fireflies the size of marbles,

blueish-white, their surfaces pearlescent and painfully bright.

She turned to me, stiff, afraid to move as the lights dazzled her. "Richard?" It was a cry for help. "What shall I do?" She was looking at me as if she felt she would never see me again, that a single strike from one of these things would be enough to kill her. I didn't know what to do, or why they'd crowded around her and appeared to be leaving me alone. Then I remembered something Gruber had said during our earliest encounter with the phenomenon, something about drawing them to us with our thoughts. He'd been speculating, but it was the only thing I had to go on. With an effort I focussed on the lights, imagined drawing them to me. At first nothing happened, but then I saw the swarm grow less dense, less frenzied, as one by one they made their way to me.

She was breathing raggedly, recovering from the surprise,... gathering her wits. She realised what I was doing, was amazed by it, then I saw her focus upon the swarm, and draw it back to her. I focussed on a single light and drew it back, drew it deliberately to the palm of my hand which I held out before me, to catch it,... though in reality I merely let it settle there. I did this instinctively, and it seemed to be no more complicated a thing than simply "wishing" it. I felt its energy as it hovered a few centimetres above my skin. It was like static electricity running through my fingers and my wrist. The feeling was exquisite. I opened my other palm and invited another light to settle there,... not touching, but hovering, pulsating, and again the sensation was delightful.

After watching me for a moment, Gabrielle held out her own palms. Energies settled there like little birds, and her body quivered at their touch. Then she was laughing excitedly, sighing with pleasure as the cloud swarmed, stroking her skin – arms legs, body. Curious, I made to squeeze the lights in my palms, just to see if they had substance. They changed their hue at once from cool blue to red and I felt their heat - intense and threatening, so I relaxed my grip and they popped out from my fingers as if repelled by an opposite charge.

"They're reading our minds, Richard."

"I don't know. I can't believe they're intelligent. No,... they're perhaps reacting to our bio-energetic field in some way,... which we're influencing with our minds. When we relax, we draw them to us,... when we're tense, they're repelled."

"Then,... they will not touch us? But they are attracted to metal, they strike it. We've seen this."

"Yet they take no interest in your watch."

"My?..."

At that moment a sphere of energy collapsed into a ribbon of yellow sparks and seemed to enter Gabrielle's Rolex, its gold bracelet suddenly luminous. I gasped in alarm, feeling for sure that it must have burned her wrist, but she gave another look of delighted surprise, then ducked as the sparks once more formed themselves into a sphere and shot clean over her head.

I was at a loss. I was beginning to enjoy what was blatantly impossible. Gabrielle too had moved quickly from terror to excitement. Then, with a sound like a rush of wind, they were gone, across the lake to join the greater swarm that was by now some way distant. She bent over, breathless, hair tousled, her arms outstretched, fingers waving, beseeching their return. "Oh,... Richard, they played with us,..."

I sought a logical explanation, but nothing would explain what we'd just seen, and I had to admit that Gabrielle's description of events made more sense. She was stroking her arms, trying to hold on to the memory of the exquisite feeling the swarm had bathed her in. She looked at me, read my dazed surprise for a moment then laughed. "I was worried there for a moment."

"Are you all right?" I asked her. "I resisted them more,... they kept more of a distance from my skin, but you,.. you seemed,..."

"I know,... I allowed them to ravish me. It was the first touch - how could you resist it?"

"I was wary, I suppose. I didn't want sending off into another vision."

"Well,... I seem to be all right, though there's no way of knowing I suppose."

"Knowing what?"

"If my reality is a continuation of what it was before."

“If I'm real, you mean? Or you're dreaming me?”

“Yes. How could I know for sure? Our past is our only sense of continuity.”

“You'll know if you wake up.”

“Will I? I'm not so sure there's a difference any more.” She looked at the Kayak, then me, and shook her head, bewildered. “What strange thoughts,” she said.

“No stranger than the way we've decided to dress for rowing a boat.”

She laughed. “Yes,... look at us. Whatever were we thinking? It would be a shame to spoil this dress, and I'm not even sure I can get it in the boat.”

“Perhaps it'll bring us luck. If nothing else, if they catch us, who on earth would take us as a serious threat?”

“Oh,... I don't know,... you look like James Bond.”

“Ha!,... And you,... you look familiar too, dressed that way. Could we not have met before?”

“Perhaps the clothing haunts us. It recognises itself through our eyes.”

“It's as good an explanation as any. But listen to us; we're beginning to sound very strange, you know?”

“Yes,... it's like it doesn't matter any more, how foolish we sound.”

“That's just it, I don't think we sound foolish at all.”

“Neither do I.”

Once more we contemplated the Kayak. You'd think we would've been afraid to take it out on the water now – what with the increasingly strange phenomenon going on all around us - but I think the opposite was the case. We'd survived it, been surprised, even delighted by it, and if anything our encounter armoured us. We felt,... elevated, as if we'd risen above and were no longer a tangible part of the real world. If they tried to touch us, we would be like ghosts, or the fates would

intervene and protect us. We felt blessed.

Chapter 35

It was after midnight now, the moon coming up, illuminating a silvery mist that lay close to the water. Our paddles sloshed thickly as we made cautious progress in the dark. We had nothing to guide us other than keeping an anticlockwise course around the island, and trusting there would be a landmark to see us across to the mainland.

After a while the mist rose and obscured the shore of the island, so we tried moving closer in, then we might regain sight of it, but we seemed to paddle for a long time without coming up against it. I looked behind us and saw only the same curtain of misty darkness swallowing up our wake. Without a datum, or a compass, we might have been paddling in circles for all we knew, and the lake was vast. I felt my head swirling as vortices of panic and disorientation washed over me. I could only trust that Gabrielle's senses were more resilient than mine. We'd been on the water for twenty minutes when she stopped paddling.

“I'm sorry Richard,” she said. “You were right. This was a bad idea.”

“It's okay,” I replied. “The night's warm at least. There's no hurry. We can ride it out until dawn if we have to. ”

“I think we'd better,” she said then almost in the same breath, she gave a start. “Richard, look out!”

Visibility was only a few meters by this time and we had no warning of the vessel ahead of us. It appeared suddenly and we only narrowly avoided ramming it. It was Gunther's boat, lifeless, rocked gently by the waves. There was a hamper on board, and a suitcase, but no sign of life. We brought ourselves along-side of it, spooked by its Marie Celeste air. Gabrielle looked about, and fancied she heard something.

“Listen!”

“What?”

“Over there,...”

There came a voice, or more of a weary cry, half sobbing. It sounded

like,..

“Bernadette?”

She was swimming, but in a dazed, half-hearted way. I called to her and she seemed to register our presence, homed in and began to swim clumsily towards us. Gabrielle leaned down into the water and caught her arm. She was breathless and white in the misty moonlight.

“The lights,” she gasped. “They swarmed around me. I tried to get them off,...I fell,... I,... lost the boat. I couldn't get back.”

“You're safe now,” I told her, though I couldn't imagine how we were going to get her into the boat without tipping us all out.

“Where's Gunther?”

“I came alone. There are soldiers at the hotel now. Herr Gruber, wanted me to hide on the island, with you. But it was difficult to get away without them seeing.”

We tried to haul her aboard the Kayak but, as I'd feared, the weight of her threatened to tip us over. She'd been in the water for a long time, the cold had weakened her muscles, made her slow and clumsy and she was shivering. If we didn't get her out, I feared she might yet drown. It was only by hanging on to Gunther's heavier boat for balance, we finally managed it.

Things had become desperate or I would not have grasped her by the front of her blouse in order to more safely haul her aboard. The buttons burst, and as she rolled into the bottom of the boat, her blouse fell open to reveal soft breasts. I heard Bernadette's sigh,... the sigh from the vision, and suddenly I understood the nature of her relief. Gabrielle gave me a look that was very knowing, before delicately replacing the folds of Bernadette's blouse.

“There,” she said. “The mystery is solved. Now you may sleep more easily, Richard. But how strange. What else will come true, I wonder? Your daemons,... they are are playful,... but ultimately wise, and on our side, I think. You had better be kind to them and do as they say.”

Bernadette, who was only grateful to be out of the water, suddenly realised her lack of modesty and pinched her collar together. “Forgive

me," she said, then: "Thank you." Then she began to weep.

Gabrielle brushed the matted hair from the girl's eyes and tried to calm her. "We saw the lights too," she said. "You must not be afraid of them."

Bernadette nodded, as if she accepted our word. "I thought I would drown. I was sure of it."

"Why did Gruber want you to hide with us?" she asked.

"Soldiers are soldiers, Mademoiselle. Herr Gruber, he does not like them there. The other women on his staff, they are,... more matronly, he says and do not attract attention the same way."

"Is Schlesinger among them?"

Bernadette nodded. "And civilians, scientists. I do not like Schlesinger. He has taken charge now. Herr Gruber keeps to his rooms, and speaks to us secretly, at the back of the hotel."

"Why did they return?"

"They are studying the lights. It is not just here, but all over Europe. There are many lights – big ones, little ones. They are causing damage, setting fires."

"And the guests have all gone now?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle. Your parents among them, though they were unhappy and made a great fuss."

Gabrielle nodded, unable to hide her relief. "I can imagine," she said. She took a breath. It was unsteady, and her chest trembled a little with emotion. She'd escaped them once more, and though our situation seemed even more desperate to me now, I swear I caught a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

I managed to tie Gunther's boat to the stern of the Kayak and we began to make way sluggishly, towing it behind us. But we'd been struggling for so long the boats spinning this way and that, we'd completely lost our bearings by now, and what with the darkness and the mist which drifted ever more thickly about us there seemed little

point in trying to make way at all.

“Gabrielle, stop. We could be going anywhere,” I said, but just then, I caught a glimpse of something in the distance, through a momentary parting of the mists. It was a splash of luminous green, set against the midnight blue of the sky. “The pavilion,” I said. “We can make for that.” The mists had already closed over it, and I tried to memorise its position.

Bernadette shook her head, afraid. “But,... there are soldiers. They watch for the lights from there. We must go to the island. It is safer.”

“We've no way of knowing where the island is,” I said. “The best we can do is row towards the pavilion, and find the shore.”

“But they have orders to detain you, sir, and to rescue Mademoiselle. It is very dangerous for you.”

Gabrielle agreed. “It seems you are a danger to women, Richard. How are we to manage you? We must row away from the pavilion. Any straight line will then take us farther from La Maison. We cannot risk them interfering with us. I know we meant to escape my love but things have changed now and we shall try again, another time. ”

Though I'd been the cautious one, having now given myself over to the madness of it, I was horrified by the thought of a return to the slowness of the island and its eerie isolation.

“There is food for a week in the hamper, sir,” said Bernadette. “We *must* go back to the island. And we need not flounder in the darkness – look, I have this.” She beamed, showing me what I had mistaken for a small medallion that hung from a chord around her neck. It was, in fact, a compass.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. “Richard?”

I shrugged. With nothing to take a bearing from, a compass was of little use. “We could just head west,” I suggested, my heart sinking. “We'll most likely miss the island by a mile, but at least it'll keep us away from La Maison.”

But we didn't miss the island. We paddled slowly west, eventually emerging from the mist into a brightly moonlit scene. The island, off to

our right, was clearly visible, the forest clad hills of the eastern shore rose beyond it, and we could see even the pale snows of the Alps floating above us like spectres. We found the jetty easily and ran the Kayak ashore. Then Gunther's boat, which was too heavy to drag, we made fast against the pilings.

I cast Gabrielle a look as we heaved the hamper onto the boards. I fear there was a darkness in it and she read me well enough. “I do not know why this is the way it is, Richard,” she whispered. “But we must watch over her now.” She motioned with her eyes to where Bernadette stood, a little way off, a thin figure, white in the moonlight, shivering and frightened, still holding together her blouse. She looked vulnerable, and child-like.

“Gruber has sent her to us. Though why I cannot imagine.”

“For us to look after?” I said.

“Well,... why not? We can hardly expect her to wait on us under the circumstances, can we?”

“It's what he said, in the vision, remember? I wrote it down. *If I were to send her to you,... you would take care of her wouldn't you?*”

“I know. It's curious. But that was Gruber the Daemon, not the real Gruber.”

“I'm beginning to wonder if there's a difference. Everything feels like it's blurring into one – dreams, reality, visions, imagination. I can't tell the difference any more.”

Out over the water, the mist grew luminous as a couple of light-spheres circled lazily within it. They were a long way from us, nearer perhaps to La Maison. Then there came a flash and, after a pause, a muffled roar and the luminosity of the mist turned black and cold. It had an air of fancy and all the melodrama of a stage-set, yet we observed it with the detachment of an audience who had begun to tire of the play, and to wonder instead at its meaning, or if we had been duped and there was no meaning, that we were being made fools of.

“You're right,” she said. “This has more of Mercury about it than Mars. At least Mars we can understand,... but Mercury,... you can never tell. Mars is no joke, but Mercury,... his jokes have always a serious

meaning."

We picked up the hamper, still in our party clothes, which were by now a little damp and crumpled, and Bernadette, still dripping and shivering, led the way back to the apartment.

Gabrielle settled her down in the second bedroom. I was embarrassed by this. Our lovemaking had always been uninhibited,... but now I felt we could not speak above a whisper without Bernadette overhearing. I found myself hoping Gabrielle would not be amorous, for fear the sound of our lovemaking would carry to the girl, and I would not be able to look her in the eye in the morning. It seems selfish I know, especially since she'd almost drowned trying to bring us supplies, but now I wished we did not have to share an apartment with her, when there were three others she could have had to herself. The truth was, of course, I feared her presence in other ways.

"How is she?" I asked. I was in the kitchen, spreading out the contents of the hamper, taking stock of them, when Gabrielle joined me. It was after two in the morning and we both looked weary, ragged,....

"Comfortable," she replied.

"Sleeping?"

"Hardly, but then who can blame her? After a night like this I could not sleep."

"And the shivering?"

"She's all right. She's cosy now. She was just cold – she's been in the water for a long time. Go and see her."

"Better not disturb her."

Gabrielle nodded, picking up on my unease, and apparently enjoying it. "I'm thinking it will be very interesting to read our story from now on, Richard. But if you ever write her name on my skin, you had better put it somewhere I cannot see, and may the gods help you if you ever write my name on hers. I am your story, remember? She is not ours."

"Doesn't any of this strike you as odd?"

“Odd?” She laughed. “Tell me what is not odd about our situation, Richard?” She hook her head in despair. “I don't know what she is to us. Perhaps I was wrong and she *is* our story. Perhaps she's what we need more than anything – a purpose beyond ourselves.”

“No,... that's not it. But she means *something. S*he's changed the course of our story. I really wasn't expecting this.”

I was so tired I could barely string two coherent thoughts together. “We might have been driving over the Alps by now,” I went on. “Dropping down into Italy by dawn.”

“But who knows what we might also have been saved from by not fleeing.” She twisted the top from a bottle of wine and poured us out two large glasses. “If they come for us tonight, they will find us drunk in bed, and so be it. I'm hoping the wine will at least help you to overcome your inhibitions.”

"I'm not,...." I lowered my voice, "*inhibited*."

"There is another woman under this roof, and the child in you does not want her to think you are so full of passion for me you cannot also be full of passion for her." She smiled and motioned upstairs with her eyes. "Come, it's been a long day, and a strange one. We should sleep before it gets any stranger."

Chapter 36

For all of her challenging tone, she made little noise that night and seemed as respectfully aware of Bernadette's presence as I. We made love of course, for to lie with Gabrielle and not want to make love is impossible, but we went about it in a state of erotically charged slow motion, so that the dawn seemed to be breaking before we'd even progressed half way to climax. I may even have dreamed the sublime senselessness that ensued, dreamed also the dawn, and the dusk and the new night, while still wrapped in Gabrielle's hot embrace,... dreamed too the swirling of lights around the pool,... and then a new dawn so that I no longer had any sense of what day it was. I felt myself waking, though by now I understood this was no guarantee of course. And then there came a sound,... a man whistling, outside, below,... a strange air,...

I was alert at once and on the defensive. The revolver lay on the bedside cabinet so I took it up and moved to the balcony overlooking the pool. The dawn was amber, bearing again the promise of heat and sun, and I could plainly see a handful of small lights circling over the pool. I could see too the figure of a white suited man, leaning on a cane, watching them.

Gruber!

Thank God!

Gruber's presence was a strange balm, though I knew of course he was never to be completely trusted. But he was also so utterly beguiling, no one who knew him could bear to be excluded from his presence for very long. If there was a solution to the enigma, then surely he possessed it and would save us all.

I did not want to waken Gabrielle by calling to him, so I left the revolver behind and rushed downstairs, ready to greet him, but on drawing closer I was puzzled by the cane and the slightly bent frame. It was not Gruber. I knew also at that point I *was* still dreaming, though the word dream seemed inadequate by now. I'm not sure of the cause; my dreams had always been humdrum before. It was my contact with this strange energy, I think. It opened things up in unexpected ways, focussed the inner eye to such a degree that at times drifting off was

more akin to waking up. I was conscious and lucid but the situation, though plausible, was plainly impossible. In the absence of anything more tangible, I could only hope it was meaningful.

“Herr Jung.”

I'd once seen the grainy recording of an interview with Carl Jung, from 1961, posted on You Tube. He'd been an elderly, white haired sage of a man then, in the last years of his life, and it was that image I was projecting now. He turned at my approach and gave me a kindly smile. But it was not Jung, not really; it was just the image of him, plundered from my memory and used as a best fit for the situation that was about to unfold now.

"Good morning," he said. "You are wondering if I am who I appear to be, and you are correct,... I am not."

"I know. I'm dreaming, so you must be an archetype?"

He winced. "Such a dry word? Do I have to *be* anything?"

"It helps, Herr Jung. It's the curse of being human; we can't understand anything without first giving it a name - even though by naming it we lose its true meaning."

"There is an older word than archetype, you know?"

"Daemon?"

"Well done. And we must be careful with daemons, Richard." He asked me to walk with him and then he said: “You can think of me as Jung if it makes more sense to you that way.”

“I think I'd like that, sir.”

“Then it is my pleasure. Come. Walk with me?”

We took a gravel path, perfectly level, bordered by beautifully moulded edgings. It was impossible, all of it,... the way leading through the forest where no pathways existed, through clearings where there were no clearings, and among meadows of spring flowers long past their season.

“I had a daemon,” he said. “I called him Philemon. As far as others were concerned, he was entirely imaginary, but he seemed quite real to me. I made no distinction between his counsel, and that of the wisest of my living contemporaries.”

“I remember reading about him in your books. I have no difficulty with the concept of daemons, Herr Jung.”

"Yet even though you are prepared to accept their existence, and have lived with them now for several days, you resist granting them any objective reality. To you they are twists of psychic energy buried in your own unconscious mind. You believe that by assimilating them into consciousness, you can ease your neuroses. I feel some responsibility for this, since it is through a slavish devotion to my works that you have reached these somewhat imperfect conclusions.”

His English was a little old-school - his accent, a mixture of Swiss and that peculiarly dated received pronunciation of the class conscious Englishman.

“You're saying I should be prepared to acknowledge their independent status? Though they're not literal, they're non-the less meaningful, and real?”

“Quite so. “

“I dare not, Herr Jung. To admit that would be,...”

He sighed, and appeared on the verge of sharing a confidence, then paused in his steps and we looked out over the lake through a clearing in the trees. I could see the pavilion, perfectly framed, and barely a hundred yards away. This was another impossible thing, but as ever with dreams, lucid or otherwise, it was entirely plausible at the time. "You are only the tiniest fraction of who you think you are, my boy,” he said. He tapped his head. “The ground of your being lies hidden inside of you, and is rooted in the Anima Mundi, you know?"

"Anima Mundi?"

"The soul of the world. It is where we all come from, humans and daemons. But we exist separately. For the daemon there is no concept of time you see? Your story for instance,... it makes no difference to us if all your scenes are played in random order,... they would still make

sense."

"No time,... no sequence to things?"

“Quite so. Imagine knowing the beginning, the middle and the end, and yet still enjoying the story. For the daemon it is the structure that provides the interest, the interconnections, the subtle feel of its weave – it is here that lies enlightenment. It's like when you gaze down upon a city from a great height - you have a wider perspective than if you are trapped among the noise and bustle at street level. The daemonic possess that wider perspective. To them there is no past, no future,...”

“Then they have no concept of development? No sense of self-growth? For how else would they gauge it. A human being can look back and say he's better or worse than he was at some point before – Gabrielle said something about her past being her only sense of continuity – are you saying daemons are perfect?”

He laughed. “Ha! Far from it, my boy, as you will find out to your cost if you trust them unconditionally. Some development is possible,.... but only by observing the progress you mortals make in your individual stories. You see, it is by existing *in* time that the greatest development is achieved. This is why the daemons take such an interest in you.”

He sighed, wistfully, then shook his head. "You'll be all right, I think. You're well placed to weather what is coming."

"What,... what is coming?"

"Imagination, Richard. These characters you create? You think they do not live? You think the old gods were just stories got up to entertain children? The world must take the daemons seriously, or the world has no purpose and will suffocate in an existential vacuum of its own making."

“All of what you've said, Herr Jung,... I do not doubt it, but it seems an awful lot to be going on inside my own head.”

We came down to the lake shore and sat upon a grassy bank, the waters dark but sparkling and spread out seemingly to infinity now. From the gravel at his feet, Jung took up a handful of pebbles, then discarded all but three. “The path to enlightenment, Richard, consists of three steps,” he said, and then he tossed a pebble into the lake

where it landed with an emphatic plop. “First, there is the realisation of something *other*, something that is greater than yourself, and not of human origin, you know? Something *supernatural*. If you are fortunate, you might experience it briefly, a momentary awakening, a profound realisation, but inevitably, it slips through your fingers, and you feel the loss of it in your deepest self. This is always the way.” He tossed another pebble. “Second, you spend every waking moment trying to find it again, trying to reconnect with this mysterious sense of the other. And finally, third,...” He handed me the remaining pebble, as if he expected me to tell him the answer. “And the third?” he repeated.

I examined the pebble, struggling for an answer. “Herr Jung,... I,...”

“All knowledge is a matter of remembering, Richard. You already know the answer to my question. You have simply forgotten it. Now remember,... what is the third and final stage to understanding everything it is that you seek? What is the answer to the ultimate question, Richard?”

“That there is no other?”

He slapped his knee, and his eyes narrowed as the blade of his wisdom penetrated deeper. “Good. You see, the point is this: the ground of being is timeless and dimensionless, so all talk of locating ourselves inside our apparently physical selves is simply to go along with the illusion of separateness. We are confined, yes,... but only by our expectations. Time and space,... these are psychological constructions. Look around you. Is this La Maison du Lac?”

“No.”

“But why not?”

“Because,... these are only my memories of it, and I'm distorting them, making things up, compressing distances. I can't do that in reality. My reality is fixed, consistent. I drive my car though France and drop down into Switzerland, every time. In dreams, I could just as easily end up in,... I don't know,... Russia or Egypt. There is no consistency to dreams, Herr Jung. That is why we dismiss them. They have no geography. If I put a pencil down on my writing desk,... I do not expect to find it in my pocket later on.”

“Pah! These are only inconsistencies when viewed from a limited

perspective. I want you to think about beginnings and endings. A man arrives at a remote hotel, he sees a lonely young woman in need of rescue. At some point later in time, the two drive off together into the sunny embrace of a happy ending. Whether the story makes sense, whether it *means* anything at all depends entirely on what happens in-between. It is the journey that makes the difference Richard, and there are any number of ways you can connect the beginning and the end. Some will be pleasing to the daemons, others will not.

"Without your story those of us in the daemonic realm have no purpose. You must therefore not underestimate your significance to us. The literal and non literal realms must co-exist in harmony, neither dominating the other, each informing the other. But you have shut them out for such a long time, I fear they will now take you by force. Only by overwhelming you and creating a chaos of your neatly ordered world will a kind of order eventually be restored. But this may mean whole generations of humans living at closer quarters with these creatures, as they once did in ancient times."

“Creatures?”

“We will haunt the world again, Richard. You give us no choice.”

"Herr Jung,... Please. What must I do?"

"Trust in your Soul. She will guide you. She is of our kind, but perhaps the only one who is consistently on your side."

"Gabrielle?"

"Gabrielle,... Bernadette,.. both are manifestations of your soul.” He winked. “Just don't forget which one is your lover, my boy, or you will regret it. Nor should you forget that it is the underworld your soul dwells in, and one cannot gain soul's trust unless one has already drunk a toast to death." He nodded. "Yes,... yes, I know you already have,... but take care not to forget the importance of your own spirit. Your spirit is what drives you. It is the vehicle that carries you in this life.”

“My spirit?”

“Your Ego Richard, your desire to *be*. Don't make the mistake of crushing him, or you'll make a widow of your soul.”

“Then,... I must not be too eager to embrace death?”

“Ask yourself this: what is it that you *want*, my boy?"

"Want?"

"Yes, *want. It is not a trick question."*

"Then,... I suppose I want to,... finish my story,... and,..."

"Good!... Go on,... Yes?"

"Have it mean something."

"Ha! Splendid,... and I'm sure you'll succeed.”

“But you live outside of time. You must know if I finish it or not?”

“Oh yes,...”

“You said there was a happy ending.”

“It's a possible version,... others don't end so well of course. In the main, I see its structure, its connections and they grow ever more pleasing. I can only urge you to persevere, and not to be afraid to speak of strangeness. There is sometimes more sense in it than in logic."

He saw my confusion and smiled in a fatherly way, gentle, indulgent. “No man can get a proper footing upon the landscape of his life until he has learned to navigate the landscape of his dreams.” He laid a hand upon my arm. "Now it's time to go. Your soul is stirring, my boy."

Chapter 37

I woke in time to see Gabrielle place a teacup at my bedside. She wore a pencil skirt, crisp white blouse, and a little black waistcoat, like a waitress. She smelled fresh and starchy, like Bernadette. As my eyes focussed, I saw the La Maison motif embroidered on her lapel.

“What do you think?” she asked.”Smart isn't it? They were in the case Gruber sent. There's a uniform for you too.”

I groaned. “We work for Gruber now?”

“No, silly. We're in disguise. It's simple. Brilliant.”

I thought about this, fighting through the fog of my brain and the shock of my apparent interview with Carl Jung. We'd talked of him – Gruber and I - that night of the dance. That's what had triggered the images in my unconscious imagination – yes, yes, I knew all that - but it had been real, and it had meant something.

“Simple yes,” I said. “But brilliant?... I don't know.”

“It will buy us time if the soldiers come. I mean, how will they know who we are?”

“Must I wear a waistcoat too?”

“But of course, and it will fit your pocket-watch nicely.” She frowned suddenly at the memory of something. “Bernadette tells me they have confiscated Gruber's watch. Schlesinger wears it now.”

“Schlesinger stole Gruber's watch?”

“Needs must, hard times, we are all in it together. Blah-di-blah-di-blah. These are the mantras of the new Europe,... apparently.” She ran her hands over her skirt, smoothing it. “I like the way it shows off my hips, don't you?” I think I would like to work in a restaurant and steal men's eyes from their wives with my derrière in this skirt. You have restaurants in England?”

“We're not complete savages, you know?”

“Then it is settled. I shall earn money as a waitress, while you write our

story. What? You smile? It's a more realistic dream than the idea of me becoming a Hollywood actress. You see, how mature I am becoming? How pragmatic?"

"I preferred the polka-dot dress you wore last night."

"Ah,... yes. I'm in love with that one too. I hope I haven't spoiled it. You would like to make love to me in that dress?"

"Gruber's watch is important," I said, ignoring her teasing.

She sighed and nodded. "I know. You are not the only one who interprets your reality as if it were a dream. We'll get it back, Richard. I don't want Schlesinger as part of my reality, either." She glanced away. "But for now we have another problem."

"Oh?"

"There are light-spheres playing in the pool. And I want to swim."

It was like stepping back into the dream. But the only similarity between dream and reality this morning were the light-spheres. They were like the ones we'd encountered last night, a small swarm of them, a dozen or so, marble sized and intensely bright, even in daylight.

We knelt at the poolside to watch them a while before I plucked up the courage to lower my hand and to will one of them towards me. I was unaware of Bernadette having come up behind but I heard her gasp and the distraction caused me to lose focus. The light-sphere danced away, but Gabrielle caught it with her own mind, and attracted to her hand.

"It's all right, Bernadette," she said. "Watch."

She cradled the sphere in her palms as if it were a small bird, and she lifted it up, then held it to her bosom. "You see? They are quite charming if you are gentle. It is violence they do not like. When they are blueish-white, like this, they are content, they feel cool and exquisitely tingly. When they glow with a reddish hue, they are distressed, and anything can happen. But that need not concern you if you are gentle,... if your thoughts are always gentle."

Though I'd heard nothing of the sort before, and I don't know if

Gabrielle truly believed any of this, or was simply trying to reassure Bernadette, it made a perfect kind of sense, like when you know instinctively something is true by the feel of it. And so we made progress with the strangeness now by trusting our instincts. It was a novel sensation, but really, I was beginning to feel that the world for which we were bound, logic and reason were no longer of any use. What was it Jung had said last night? I had to remember it for my story. I *had* to.

...I can only urge you to persevere, and not to be afraid to speak of strangeness. There is sometimes more sense in it than in logic.

But dare I, dare I speak of it? All right,... what was also odd, watching Gabrielle with the light, I had the impression I could actually feel what she felt. I wondered if I might be reading her pleasure merely from the serenity of her expression, or more fancifully, if I was picking up on the waves of her own energetic pattern radiating into the space that surrounded her. I shook my head. What the hell was I thinking! Such empathy would require a supernatural connection.

Bernadette had put on fresh clothes, and looked once more crisply starched and wholesome in her uniform, but she *felt* different to Gabrielle. She felt,... shrunken,... as if consumed by something. What was it? At first I wondered if it was a lie, or a deception that closed her off, like one shielding a candle flame. There was a darkness in her, I was certain of it, but it was also something that spoke of the long ago, and I was assured of her sincerity in the here and now - also a deeply touching, though totally misplaced admiration. I blushed to feel it. It was so,... beautiful,...

"How is Heinrich?" I asked her. It was clumsy, I know, and I felt Gabrielle chiding me for it. From Bernadette, I felt a flutter of confusion, mixed feelings - guilt, tenderness. This was so eerie!

"He is well, Mr. Graves." But once again there was something concealed, something disapproved of. Had Heinrich upset her?

"Please, you must call me Richard. We are all in this together now, you know?"

"Oh no, sir, I couldn't do that. I am of La Maison. And you are a guest."

Gabrielle, who had also been watching and feeling her said: "The

younger men of La Maison, now jump to Schlesinger's tune. Is that it?"

She'd hit upon the very thing. I felt a flutter of surprise in Bernadette, then watched her gather herself; she nodded."They are excited to be among soldiers, I think." She gathered her lips in disapproval. "They bring an air of adventure, of action."

Again, Gabrielle read her. "And Gruber's charm is not so macho. He has more of a mystique, a charming edge,... but this is easily eclipsed by testosterone. And guns *Oui*? The soldiers threaten to corrupt them."

I saw it in Bernadette's eyes, felt it seeping from her heart; the loss of the magic of La Maison as Gruber had been displaced by another authority – one without a mandate. I thought again of the dream. Gruber had a strong spirit and a mystical power granted him by relations with his soul that were correct. The soldiers were divorced from their souls and for all the ruin they might make of the world, they were already dead men.

"Gruber will be all right," I told her. "He doesn't need an entourage of starry eyed youths to assure him of the calibre of his own spirit."

"They forget how much they owe him," she said.

"I'm sure Gruber would say they owed him nothing."

"That is why I like to be with him, sir. But they forget why they are there. They forget all the trouble the outside world has caused them. Herr Gruber understands things - not like the soldiers and the scientists who understand things only on the surface - in other words not at all, yet think they know everything, and will not listen to others, for how can anyone know any more than they?"

"You said they were studying the lights? How? What do they do?"

She shook her head and frowned. "They have a machine. It shoots darts at the lights. The lights shoot back. The machine is designed to capture the energy, and measure it. Except, I've heard them talking and they are puzzled because they cannot measure anything at all."

"It all sounds rather,... primitive."

"I don't like it. The more they shoot at the lights, the more lights seem

to come, as if the lights enjoy the game. You say they are playful, and I can see how you might think that, but they are also dangerous. They glow red when the soldiers are around."

I looked at the swarm in the pool. They were like mischievous sprites, mercurial, inscrutable, intangible. They were there but somehow not there at the same time. Was that not the defining property of the daemonic! For the first time then I think I realised we were witnessing the breaking through of the unreal into reality. What had triggered it was irrelevant now. What was important was that we understood how powerful it was, that nothing we looked at would ever be the same again. We could no longer gauge the world with any certainty. Even by observing it now, we changed it.

Gabrielle let her tiny light go, raising her palm so it might take flight, which it did at once, swiftly rejoining the others still swirling around the pool. Bernadette felt awkward, embarrassed, inarticulate. Had she said too much, or not enough? There was a flicker of gratitude, a spark of relief, all of it extinguished by the damp cloud of a cloying self loathing.

"It'll be all right," I reassured her.

She smiled. “You're very kind, sir, but I don't think so. My world has ended. The dream of La Maison; it is all over now. I am glad though that, if I cannot be with Herr Gruber, then I can at least be with you,... both of you. You are the last guests of La Maison, now, and surely the most worthy. Please let me be your servant.”

I felt a tremor of emotion in Gabrielle which confused me. She struggled with it, tried hard not to let it out, but it emerged anyway. It was a wave of compassion. Is this what it felt like when someone took you into their heart? Again I wondered if I was really feeling any of this. I hoped it was a passing delusion, because this level of empathy was something I surely couldn't handle for long. “We don't need a servant, Bernadette,” she said.

Though Gabrielle's words were meant kindly, Bernadette read them as a rejection and I felt a wave of sorrow, a dark cloud settling over her,... regret, loneliness,... and I remembered our conversation about the importance and the meaning of her servitude,... to her. Gabrielle did not understand this,... she'd spent long enough in submission to the world to know she could not wish it on another. Perhaps I could explain this to her later. Perhaps we could let Bernadette play the part of servant, so long as it pleased her,... and hopefully between us,

Gabrielle and I could find something that pleased her more.

"I'm going to swim," said Gabrielle, then unfastened the top button of her blouse. She looked pointedly at Bernadette while she did this. "Will you join me?" No, Gabrielle did not want a servant. She was offering her friendship instead.

Bernadette wanted to swim - I could feel that, but there were two problems: first she had no costume and second the pool was full of lights. She'd yet to realise Gabrielle's intimacy was not won easily; when she offered it, she would tolerate no reserve and the price was always high. Also she had a way of knowing what it was you most feared, and demanding it of you in payment. Your reward was all of her, and the liberation for your self into the bargain. It's always that way when you dare to court your soul.

"I'll go and check the boats" I said, thinking to eliminate Bernadette's embarrassment at having a man around, while she swam possibly *sans vêtements,* but she was still self-conscious, afraid of baring her skin to Gabrielle. Why? Because she found her powerful and sexy! This puzzled me; there was nothing unattractive about Bernadette. It was a matter of self belief, then, of spirit. Her spirit was subdued, fragile, timorous,... damaged?

I left them to it, Bernadette still undecided, and Gabrielle by now tugging her blouse up from her waistband. I tried to will the lights from the pool, thinking to have them to follow me, but I suspect Gabrielle wanted them to remain. Her desire to initiate Bernadette into her company was far stronger than my ability to spare the girl's anxieties. I only hoped Bernadette was prepared for the kind of relationship Gabrielle was capable of offering.

Chapter 38

I walked slowly towards the jetty. I wasn't worried about the boats. It was simply an excuse; I wanted only to give the women as much time as possible together. They'd catch no harm from swimming with the light-spheres, always supposing Bernadette could be tempted into the pool in the first place. Gabrielle understood them well enough, having made playful creatures, or fairies out of them, and Bernadette did not possess an aggressive spirit. She'd be all right if she followed Gabrielle's lead, and swam gently, inviting the lights to play along her skin and make her tingle – though what strange dreams this would induce in her I could barely imagine.

I found the boats as we'd left them, and decided to drag the Kayak into a deeper concealment in the shadows of the forest. I trusted the craft now - it had served us well, even with my makeshift paddles, and I felt we could not afford to lose it. Gunther's wooden boat was a problem though. It would be visible through binoculars from the pavilion, and would give away the fact that the island was inhabited. But it was a heavy craft and impossible to drag ashore.

It would be steadier in rough weather than the Kayak, but even so I didn't trust it. It was an illogical, emotional reaction, but Bernadette had nearly drowned trying to navigate it. All right, *I know!* She'd fallen from the boat when set upon by a swarm of light-spheres, but still, I did not like it, and I didn't like Gunther either. I didn't trust him to keep our presence here a secret. If we were annoying to him, or if he missed his boat and wanted it back, he would betray us to Schlesinger in order to get it back. Schlesinger,... man of mission, and duty,... and logic, and order.

And the stealer of watches!

You think it odd, this obsession with mechanical watches? You think it meaningless that Schlesinger had taken Gruber's *mechanical* watch? Ordinarily I would agree with you, but that would also have been to ignore the irrational nature of the times. In dreams all objects must be interpreted as symbols. Some are personal. Others rise from the soul of the world, the Anima Mundi, where the great dream of the universe is dreamed. And suddenly, the rational world was awash with symbols. Suddenly the rational world was falling asleep and what we were

witnessing now were the unfiltered dreams of the world soul breaking through. Was it like this for everyone, I wondered? Or was it only those who had been touched by the lights? Did those who tried to keep the lights at bay do so in vain? Would they eventually overwhelm us all? It was ironic, I thought, that these alien things should be so dangerous, not because they threatened to take something away from us, or that they threatened to render us blind, like in a science fiction story, but by *awakening* us, by granting us a broader and a more penetrating vision into the nature of our lives.

I thought again about the watches as I pulled mine out and gave it a wind. Think, symbolically, Richard! The watches identified the key players in my story; there was me of course, blockhead of a hero, an archetype if ever there was one. And there was Gabrielle,... muse, symbol of my soul, or at least one aspect of it - that of lover, lately released into consciousness. And then there was Bernadette,... a reminder of the continuing nature of a man's work in the rescuing of his soul, because I suspected Bernadette was damaged in ways she could not transcend alone, unlike Gabrielle whose release would be like unleashing a volcanic eruption upon an unsuspecting world. And Gruber? Was I wise to trust Gruber, any more than I trusted Schlesinger? Both were manipulators of reality – the one material, the other imaginary.

For Schlesinger, I fancied there was no purpose to life, therefore it was ultimately cheap and it did not matter who lived or died, so long as he was in control of it. And Gruber? He observed the fear and inhibition in us all, he teased us into transcending our self imposed limitations. Gruber was the alchemist, he was the old world Mercurius, he was the wise old man. I knew who I preferred in my story, and that was why it disturbed me so deeply to think of Gruber's watch in Schlesinger's pocket. But could Mercurius be so easily outwitted? Had Schlesinger taken the watch, or had Gruber, as part of a grander plan, given it to him?

I untethered Gunther's boat and considered for a moment pushing it out into the lake - letting the currents take it wherever they wanted. But a marooned man does not sacrifice a boat, no matter how wary he is of it, so I moved it around to the opposite side of the jetty, from where I felt it would be less visible. Then I withdrew into the deep shade of the forest and sat down with the field glasses to scan what bits of the far shore of the lake I could make out.

If they were observing me with Infra red then for all of my imagined

concealment I would be plainly visible, but I reasoned that since their primary mission was to investigate the light-spheres, rather than missing guests, their instruments would be trained along the lake in the direction from which the lights always seemed to approach.

The mist from last night had cleared, though once again the forest held on to its moisture, the heat and humidity easily raising a sweat, though I was sitting perfectly still. I could see the pavilion through the glasses, a warm splash of sandy stone, and a luminous verdigris dome that seemed to float above a silvery ripple of heat quake.

I saw no no soldiers.

I gave the women an hour, by which time I'd begun to crave the cooling effects of a swim myself, though I would have to find some shorts to wear now and could no longer enjoy the alfresco feel of the air, and Gabrielle's erotic gaze upon my bare skin. I know the Continentals were not so hung up about nudity as we English, but since I could barely look at Bernadette without blushing, I reasoned it would be a while before I could casually subject her to the sight of my God-given form.

It was long enough, I thought. After all, Gabrielle did not waste time once she'd decided to offer her intimacies. By now they would have swum and were probably sitting in the sun to dry. Rising from my concealed position I turned to make my way back, then froze when I saw a soldier looking directly at me.

Schlesinger!

But I felt at once there was something curious about him. He was standing in a shaft of sunlight, which also picked out the steaminess of the forest. At first I thought the mist was partially obscuring him, wreathed around his legs and his torso, but it wasn't that. There was actually something misty and insubstantial about *him*. He was like a ghost, an apparition, looking right at me, but his eyes were unfocussed and I felt sure he did not see me. And he did not see me because he was not *actually* there.

How can I explain this? Curious, I took a step to one side, then another, and another, thinking to circle round the phantasm, in order to examine it, but it kept its face to me, turning smoothly, following my motion precisely. Was it an hallucination then? Some kind of rare mirage? Although both of these things were rational explanations,

neither could be correct and the only other thing I could come up with was that it was a thought-form.

I'd read of such things, but never believed they were truly possible - that if you thought of a location or a person with sufficient intensity, then some disembodied part of you might detach itself and actually appear in the place you were thinking of. It's easy to scoff at such stories, but just because I had never experienced such a thing myself, did not mean the tellers of such tales were liars, and I'd seen enough strangeness these past days to convince me that virtually anything was possible now. I'd been able to feel the emotions of my companions that morning to a degree that convinced me something dramatic had happened to us - so that our senses were now heightened to an extraordinary degree. Either that, or we'd been granted access to an otherwise encoded channel where information, normally garbled and meaningless, was now becoming intelligible.

I watched the thing for a while as it swirled in and out of focus, its contrast, its density shifting at random. The figure was unmoving, its expression static, like a three dimensional photograph or a hologram. At length I sighed, frustrated by the seemingly ever-increasing complexity of things and, as if it read my impatience as a dismissal, it winked out of existence, or the channel was closed.

Returning to the annex I found the women seated in towelling robes, resting upon loungers by the pool. They'd found sunglasses and lay at ease, like movie stars. Bernadette's hair was wet. She'd swum then, given herself over to the worship of her own soul, whom she'd projected onto Gabrielle. She looked already healed by it,.. radiant, more mature, and no longer afraid.

The lights had gone.

"I thought I saw you, Richard," said Gabrielle. "I thought you'd sneaked back to spy upon us as we bathed like nymphs."

"No. I've been down to the lake."

“This is what I told Bernadette. That you were a man of honour, and looked upon her with all the tenderness and respect of a father.”

“Erm,... exactly. Did you see me as well, Bernadette?"

She looked different behind her glasses. More self possessed, more self assured. "No, sir, I couldn't see you, though Mademoiselle pointed right at you."

"I was thinking of you, thinking of the pool, of whether you'd decided to swim. It was a phantasm,... of me,... a thought form,... you understand? I saw one too."

"Of me?"

"No, it was a soldier,... Schlesinger. This is all very strange, but I'm wondering if it's a sign that he's thinking about the island."

Gabrielle meditated on this for a moment, and when she spoke, this new twist in the strangeness of La Maison was already a part of her understanding of the world. "Then why do they not come?"

Bernadette answered this one: "They have no boats, Mademoiselle." She looked from Gabrielle, to me and I felt a wave of something radiating from her. It was love, compassion,... "But,... how can you bear it?" she went on. "You're saying anyone who thinks of you will appear to you now, like a ghost?"

The way she put it, it did not sound like much of a blessing. Fortunately, there weren't many who would think of me. But Gabrielle? Her parents had gone, we had escaped their physical proximity at last, but were we now to be haunted by their living phantasms? And who else would haunt us like this?

As if by way of answer, from the corner of my eye, I caught a peculiar shifting of the light and turned to see another phantasm, not of her parents, but of Gruber. He was visible only as a head and torso, well defined, though transparent, as Schlesinger had been. He was several yards away, by the pool and under any other circumstances such a thing would have been terrifying. It was inexplicable, but for some peculiar reason, neither of us felt the need to explain it, and so were better able to make our peace with it.

"You see him?" I breathed.

Gabrielle nodded."At least we know he still thinks of us."

Bernadette saw nothing."Who is it? What do you see?" she asked.

"It's Gruber," I replied.

"Well of course he still thinks of you," she retorted. "You are both very precious to him."

I sat down on the lounger at Gabrielle's feet, the both of us puzzling over this. "He means to keep us here?" I asked, for what else could I think of a man who collected people the way Gruber seemed to do? And if normality was dissolving into the anarchy of dreams, then why not? The annex was the perfect prison for us.

Bernadette was aghast. "Oh no, sir. How could he do that? No,... a prisoner might spend his whole life locked up, but he would never give his heart to his cell. His soul would never *belong* to it. Herr Gruber means for you to *belong* to La Maison, to carry it in your heart with fondness, and a longing always to return. As we all do. Is this not the way of all the best hotels?"

"There have been moments of perfection, these past weeks," she went on. "Moments when the universe opened its heart and showed me its wonders, but we are so rarely aware of them at the time,... only when we look back do they become clear.

"For me, it was the night of the first dance. Do you remember? It seems so long ago now. I danced with you, sir. We were all alive with the wonder of the night, the strangeness of it, and Herr Gruber and I were caught up with the possibility that you and Mademoiselle would overcome all the odds and dance together."

Thinking back on that night, I understood a little of what she meant, if only because I would have given anything to relive it, and next time be less reluctant to enter into the game, less afraid to begin the story. Except I could think of no path from that night to this moment, other than the one that had unfolded. So she was right perhaps; it had been a moment of perfection, but there was something fatalistic in her tone that worried me.

"It's not over, Bernadette. We *will* survive this."

She smiled, and shrugged. She appeared calm, so it surprised me all the more when she said. "I'm not sure I want to, sir."

She'd also raised her glass to death, then, which is another

characteristic of communing with one's soul it seems. Its natural environment is the underworld, sleep, unconsciousness. You cannot reach out and embrace your soul-reflection in the dark waters of the lake, without the risk of it dragging you under. You would no doubt find great things and eternal bliss in its natural abode, but it is not our place to court death before our time. It is our place to keep alive the spirit within us,... to keep faith with life,... and to endure.

I stood then, and parted the air with my hands. “No,” I said. “This story does not end with me on this island, watching you both die.”

Bernadette gave a dreamy smile, then rose, shrugged off her robe. Her body was white, with a dark shock of hair over her mons, and on the insides of her thighs, on the soft flesh normally hidden from the view of all but those most intimate with her, there rose the ladders of a former despair – little parallel lines, where she'd taken a blade to her skin. They were old wounds, I thought, healing slowly but never to be wholly eradicated. She'd meant to show me them.

With a slow smile then she crossed to the pool and slipped silently in. Gabrielle lowered her sunglasses and watched her swim a while. Then she looked at me and raised her brows. “I've been reading our story, Richard,” she said. “And I understand your confusion regarding Bernadette,... she is an odd sprite who binds us both in a mysterious way,... but I'm satisfied I have the measure of your feeling for me now. What's more you have permission to write her name on my skin.”

“Oh?”

”She drew a line with her finger across the pillow of her breast. “Here. Let her rest here for a while. She is such a good soul, and has suffered for it.”

“The marks on her legs?”

“She did not explain them to me, but I think we both can guess. Gruber has rebuilt her somehow. We must take care not to undo what he has done for her.”

“She swam with you?”

“Yes, hesitant at first, but she relaxed into it after a while.”

“And the lights took to her?”

“Oh yes. They like anyone who is easy with them.”

I watched her swimming. It was definitely the lights, I thought,... she'd been touched by the lights, as we had. Truly they opened something up in us, rendered us vulnerable to something that made us behave in ways that were strange, and to react to the strangeness of others as if it were quite normal. But was it a curse or a blessing?

Across the pool, laid out upon a lounger was the polka-dot dress. Gabrielle had put it there to dry, after our adventures in the Kayak last night. It caught my eye and she saw me looking. “You would still like to make love to me while I wear that dress?”

I gave a sigh. “We're going to have to find a way of hiding our thoughts from one another Gabrielle, or we'll never stay the course.”

“Oh?”

“You're too volatile and I'm too easily hurt.”

“Then we both have some work to do.” She laughed. “Curious,...”

“Oh?”

“The clothing we found,... it belongs to a former guest, a Hollywood actress and her lover. Bernadette was telling me the story.”

“Ah,... I wonder if the world will ever know such opulence again?”

“Pftt,... of course it will. We are human,... there will always be rich and poor. Only now opulence will mean having a full belly and a roof over your head.” She thought for a moment and then said: “So,... when do you mean to leave us?”

I didn't understand. “You know I can never leave you, Gabrielle.”

“You *have* thought about it though – just now. You were meaning to recover Gruber's watch from Schlesinger, at gunpoint if need be. This is all very strange of course, and I know you've already dismissed it from your mind, but really, I don't think it's such a bad idea, except I would have to come with you.”

“Of course it's a bad idea,” I moaned. “Last night was *almost* a good idea, but then our aim was to escape. But to recover a watch,... it seems so futile.”

“But does it not also feel noble? Think about it; perhaps it is not the recovery of the watch that is important. Perhaps it is only that it lures us back to La Maison.”

“And why would we want to do that?”

“To find out what is going on, of course. Aren't you curious?”

The sun beat down, raising a prickle of sweat, and I longed for shade, longed for the moonlit cool of the night. The air smelled dusty and burnt, with just a hint of pine from the forest to sharpen it, to freshen it and make it bearable. If we did not starve here, then surely we would fry. It was the heat,... the heat which made me think such things were important,... a man's watch as the symbol, or even the bearer of his soul, his spirit, his self,... but Gabrielle was right, at a more mundane level, I was curious to know what was going on, and what Gruber meant to do about it.

“It would be suicide,” I said.

“No, suicide is too strong a word, Richard. They will not shoot us. They may detain us,... or rather detain you,... but only if they know who we are. Only the staff of La Maison can identify us, and they are all on our side. They will not betray us.”

“Schlesinger knows me. We met,.... briefly.”

“Then let us hope he is so full of himself he does not easily remember the faces of others. Come. We dress up in our uniforms, and we go, yes?”

Chapter 39

We landed under the nose of the guard who stood idly smoking now, at the pavilion. He'd spotted us a way off and had watched through his binoculars as we'd paddled up in the Kayak. It had seemed ludicrous to me that simply by dressing up as a waiter and waitress we would become invisible, but since we passed the guard unchallenged, it seemed we were accepted into whatever world the soldiers had created for themselves here.

I read his feelings. He was not suspicious of us. He was bored. I felt the agony of it, mingled with what I took to be the pain of separation from someone he cared for.

He called out to Gabrielle in German, asking where a pretty girl like her had been hiding herself. German is not my strong point, but I got the gist of his meaning, and Gabrielle, who understood the words I'd been unable to translate, responded with a disdainful toss of her head. Then she muttered to me that it was no wonder Gruber had sent Bernadette away if she'd had to put up with such revolting manners.

I asked him politely not to be so familiar, but he apparently spoke no English, either that or his shrug was meant to say: *what are you going to do about it?* He thought me beneath him, Gabrielle too, because we were servants, except she was a woman and had other uses. I became afraid, wondering already if this was such a good idea.

There were beer-cans and cigarette butts littering the base of the pavilion. The air stank of cigarettes, and was mingled also with the odour of urine. They had evidently been using it as a latrine. The atmosphere of the place had changed. Gone was the aura of romance and in its stead there was the foetid disaster of a bus shelter on the wrong side of town. It was heartbreaking. What the hell were they thinking? This was the most magical place on the lake, could they not see it?

Coming upon the lawn we saw the machine. It was a Howitzer-like contraption, a cannon that launched a steel harpoon, attached to a massive reel of cable that lay coiled beside it. Tents had been erected some distance away, and were linked to the device by runs of wiring. I presumed it was from the tents that the soldiers launched the device

and the scientists took their readings, but I do the arrangement too much justice by making it sound professional, when to my eye it seemed shoddy and ludicrously inappropriate.

There was a subtlety about the nature of the lights. Surely they understood that? But as with everything else in nature our response to it was a giant phallus with which to rape, or stab or shoot. Was this the future of our species? If we could not fuck it or eat it, we had to kill it in order to mount it on the wall of our dubious "understanding." We could never simply get along with it.

Lengths of partially vaporised cable littered the lawn, their ends burst into fantastic starry patterns. I stooped to examine the beauty of one but we were accosted at once by a man in tee shirt and jeans, a civilian, I supposed, emerging like a bulldog from one of the tents. He was gesticulating, telling us to get off the lawn and to leave things alone.

I'd spent so long among the peoples of Continental Europe by now my ear had become adjusted to the sounds of their accents - even the languages I did not know - so they did not seem strange to me. But I struggled to place his accent, only to realise he was an Englishman, speaking in the peculiarly forced manner the English sometimes adopt when trying to communicate with bemused foreigners. I felt a deep frustration in him, but it was not because of our intrusion - that had merely irritated him - it was one more thing in a long list that he could do without. He was one of the scientists then.

He stopped, hands on hips, and spoke more slowly, in English still, but now with a false German accent, as if it would help. "Eet ees not good," he said. "Zees ees bad place. Dangerooos. You are understanding me? Ya?"

Gabrielle put her hand to her mouth to hide her amusement, then she took my arm. "Come away," she said. "I think there's something wrong with him."

I'd been looking forward to seeing the hotel again and refreshing my senses with its traditional architecture, as opposed to the austere sterility of the annexe, but something had changed here as well. Visually it was the same of course, but it felt different. Gabrielle's pace had slowed and she hugged herself, drawing breath slowly, as if fearful.

"You feel it too?" I asked. "What is it do you think?"

"La Maison has lost its spirit, Richard." She made a vague sign of the cross upon her chest. "It has died while we were away."

"No,... it's us. We've changed. We feel things differently,... we've been here too long."

"At La Maison?"

"This version of it perhaps."

"Version? I don't understand."

"Neither do I,... but Jung,...he spoke of something coming, something breaking through."

"Something?"

"Yes,... and think it's arrived."

There was no one manning the reception desk, no one in the lounge, and the radio was now silent. Its BBC tones, burbling away in the lounge had become such a feature of the place in its last days, and the silence now seemed all the more emphatic for its loss. The lobby echoed to our footsteps. The only other human sounds were coming from the dining room, where I saw Schlesinger, through the glass doors. He sat at Gruber's table with two other officers, smoking Gruber's cigars. They were talking in hushed tones, their expressions glazed with either shock or boredom.

There was an unwritten rule about smoking in the dining room: it simply wasn't done, so I took this to mean the military had not merely taken up residence but had commandeered La Maison, and turned it into a barracks – changed its rules for rules of their own.

Schlesinger wore a shirt with epaulettes to denote his rank, but beyond that he appeared more casual than he had on our first meeting. I didn't understand what this meant.

I asked Gabrielle to check our rooms, to see what remained of our belongings, what might be salvaged of them, and then I entered the dining room, as casually as you please. I don't know why I made so

bold – I suppose I'd begun to feel invisible in my uniform; just one more La Maison underling, but armed with a deadly empathy.

They looked up at my approach, and I felt at once my presence was not welcome. It was in their silence, but mostly in the daggers of their eyes. I spotted the gleam of Gruber's watch chain looped through a button hole on Schlesinger's armoured vest. The line of it led my eye to one of the top pockets, where I surmised he kept the watch.

“I wonder, gentlemen,” I said. “If any of you have seen Herr Gruber recently?”

They stared blankly. Perhaps they did not understand my English, or chose not to. “Ah,... no matter.” There was a whiskey bottle on the table, mostly empty, and though it was not yet evening, the three were already morosely drunk. Soldiers and wine cellars, like soldiers and young girls, was a combination guaranteed to inflame the appetite. I motioned to their empty glasses. “Another bottle, perhaps?”

Schlesinger nodded curtly, and I gave a faint bow as I'd seen Anton do – more of a salute than a gesture of submission. Then I about-turned. This was a bad sign – soldiers, officers at that, drunk before the sun was past the yard-arm. When the discipline of civil society has broken down, it is in the discipline of its military that it shall find its last hope. But I would not have trusted these men with my daughters, any more than the key to the wine cellar. Gruber had been wise to spirit Bernadette away.

I climbed the stairs in order to rejoin Gabrielle, and we met on the top landing. She'd been to our room but found it had been taken over, the remains of our luggage discarded carelessly in the passageway. She'd helped herself to a handful of clean pants – one of them hanging from her apron pocket, its lace drawing my eye and reminding me of the last time we'd made love, and how good she'd felt. “Richard, listen, I have seen no other staff; Heinrich, Anton, Monsieur Lagrange, no one,... “

“Perhaps they're keeping to their rooms. The soldiers don't seem very friendly.”

“But Bernadette told us Anton and Heinrich were in thrall to them. I imagined them out there on the lawn, helping with the equipment.”

“I know. It's strange.”

“Did you see the watch?”

“Schlesinger has it in his top pocket.”

“Then how to get it? Should I seduce him, do you think?” She raised her eyebrows,. “Will you permit it, I wonder?”

“I'm sure that won't be necessary. Another bottle of whiskey should have all three insensible and slumped across the table. Then we can just take it.”

We made our way to the back of the house, to the rooms where the staff lived, and we began gently tapping on doors. There was no reply at any of them. It seemed it was not only Bernadette whom Gruber had spirited away. We followed the route she had taken us some days ago and found ourselves in the courtyard at the rear of the hotel where the abandoned vehicles of departed guests were parked in mute accusation.

Once more, it was the smell of petrol here that most drew my attention. I noticed the door of one of the garages, across the courtyard, was ajar and inside there was a pile of olive-green jerry-cans. Like the policemen before them, the soldiers had been commandeering petrol - siphoning it from the abandoned cars. I looked around for the MG, hoping it had not fallen foul of such a fatal assault. It was still there, the bonnet up the engine exposed, the distributor cap un-clipped and the spark leads strewn in disarray.

"What is it Richard?"

I heaved up and down on the rear of the car and heard the reassuring slosh of petrol. The rotor arm was in my pocket. We could be out of there in seconds, the tank topped off, and the boot filled with as many jerry-cans as we could manage. We could have gone anywhere!

"You still want to go to Italy?"

"But we cannot. What are you thinking?"

Of course we couldn't leave, not without Bernadette, nor, as ludicrous as it sounds, without Gruber's watch. And even if Bernadette were with us now, we could never fit three people in the roadster. Dammit! There was something preventing a sweet conclusion to my story and I didn't

know what it was! I'd thought by now I knew where it was going, but there was some other place it seemed intent on and with reality dissolving into the madness of dreams, hour by hour,I shuddered to think what that might involve.

"Come on," she said. “We shall try Gruber's apartment. Everyone might be sheltering up there.”

We found a hidden staircase that led up to Gruber's rooms. They were high in the eaves of the house, and accessible from a broad verandah that boasted the finest view of lake and the mountains that La Maison had to offer. There was a table upon which sat a half smoked cigar and an empty glass. I could imagine him here, gazing out at the scene, his far-away eyes seeing nothing but what was reflected of the insides of his own head. The cigar and the glass both spoke of emptiness, and even before Gabrielle had knocked at the French doors, I knew there would be no reply. Finding the doors unlocked, she beckoned me to follow and we went inside. “Herr Gruber?”

“He's gone,” I said.

“How can he have gone? Where would he go,... and has he taken everyone with him? Did they walk?... it's not possible.”

I remembered the night of the dance and my last glimpse of him, with Lagrange, the pair of them hunched conspiratorially over the telephone. “How many staff have we seen?”

“What?”

“How many altogether?”

Gabrielle counted them. “Gruber, Anton, Heinrich, Bernadette, Gunther, Lagrange,... the chef we never saw, two other waitresses, whose names I do not know,... then Bernadette of course,... Altogether ten maybe?”

“Two cars, that's all. Mine's not the only old fashioned motor around. He could have spoken to someone in town, arranged the ride. We know the 'phones are working, intermittently.”

“He would not have left Bernadette behind.”

“Then the soldiers have murdered them,... I heard gunfire in the night.”

“Richard no,... I don't believe that.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then you should not say it.”

I felt chastened. “Sorry,... it was stupid of me, but what do we tell Bernadette?”

“I don't know,... we'll think of something – even if it is the truth. I just wish the truth were more convincing. ”

I felt it then, like a zephyr creeping up my neck. Gabrielle gave a shudder, and I swear the loose strands of her hair began to float as if charged with electricity. I went out onto the balcony. There was a flurry of activity on the lawn, soldiers and plain clothed men scurrying about, attending to the harpoon, checking cables, the tent flaps flapping up and down as people came in and out. They spoke a mixture of languages; some English, some French, some Italian, though the only English words I caught were expletives.

It was a little after five p.m. and the light ought still to have been good, but the clouds had gathered, their grey shades deepening, precipitating the early onset of evening. Then we watched as a familiar orb rounded the point and swirled lazily over the water of the bay.

It was a fine one, a big one. Its surface, though fiercely luminous, was iridescent in cool shades of blue. This is what I had come to know as a neutral colour, the colour these things took upon themselves if left to themselves. I felt its presence as a tingling in my arms and thighs. My hair, like Gabrielle's, also seemed to have become charged. I caught hold of the brass doorknob to the French windows, wincing in anticipation, thinking it would ground me with a jolt, but nothing happened. This was not static electricity. It was more what I suppose the mystics would have called a subtle energy, except here it was manifested in gigantic quantities, and there was no longer anything subtle about it.

Other soldiers appeared on the lawn, weapons drawn, but surely they'd already learned it was foolish to shoot at the lights? Yet what else could they be thinking of? We continued to watch from Gruber's

private balcony, spellbound and paralysed with a kind of numbed awe, as the drama unfolded. The sphere was reddening, as if picking up on the violence of the thoughts arrayed below. They were drawn to people, to thoughts, to emotions, and though they seemed to mean no harm, they were capable of reflecting emotion and intent. The spheres, the gods, if you like, were not in themselves violent, but merely returned our own violence upon us.

The sphere had cleared the shore by now and was moving closer. The soldiers had taken up the protecting poles, presumably because they'd interfered with their instruments, and they wanted the lights close enough to shoot at. It loomed large now, closer to the hotel than I'd ever seen one before. I drew back, alarmed.

“If they're going to fire that thing,” I said, “hadn't they better be doing it?”

Gabrielle was beside me and had linked her arm through mine as if to steady me. She tried to read the confusion of thoughts and feelings below. There was a storm of it and it hurt me to engage with it, but I found I could at least hold it at bay, and was encouraged by the fact that this empathic curse was to some degree controllable. Gabrielle persevered with it.

“I don't think they can,” she said. “They've tried. See,... they are checking the cables again. There is a malfunction, I think.”

“Then they're about to lose their machine,” I said, and as an afterthought: “I hope they're not launching those harpoons with the aid of explosives, or anything otherwise,... energetic.”

We exchanged a glance, then hurried down the steps that led us back to the courtyard, away from the windows, away from any possible risk of,...

It was not the light-sphere that exploded. It merely sought the metal of the harpoon. This was its nature. It had detected a path to earth and it was most likely the heat of the discharge through the metal that ignited the cordite wad – plus several others they must have stored nearby. They were big wads. We felt the ground shake as we clattered down

the steps, and we heard the shattering of glass towards the front of the hotel. The air thickened at once with dust that caught at the backs of our throats, and we spluttered it out.

Both of us imagined now a scene of carnage on the lawns of La Maison, lawns that had once, in the not so long ago, been host to afternoon teas and evening dances.

"We'd better see if we can help," she said, dismayed at the prospect of what might confront us. "I feel they are not deserving," she added. "But they're each a mother's son."

"I know,... let's see what we can do."

The gun had vanished. In its place there was a crater, three metres across. The tents had collapsed, and of the hotel, not a single pane of glass remained. There were people lying about, stunned, but so far as I could see they were unmarked - no cuts, no burns, no missing limbs. The debris from the gun must have been vaporised by the light as it discharged itself, otherwise the normal rules of energetic explosions would have applied, and we would have been looking at a far more grizzly scene than this.

We found Schlesinger on the steps of the hotel, as if he'd been rushing out when the gun had been hit, and the force had blown him back. He was just picking himself up, and was bleeding from his ears and nose. His comrades lay insensible beside him, but they were at least breathing.

Gabrielle, thinking quickly, threw a sympathetic arm around his shoulders and eased him back with whispered words of comfort. And while he succumbed to her charms, she dabbed a tissue to his nose with one hand, and slid the watch from his pocket, unseen, with the the other, then left him on the ground to recover alone. We'd been expecting a nightmare in recovering the watch, and now it had fallen so easily into our possession, it was almost an anticlimax. We looked at each other in disbelief. It was just a pity Gruber was no longer around to receive it back.

Gabrielle smiled. "We should remember,... this is still the least of our problems."

They were gathering themselves now, the unscathed seeking out the

injured. Bright green First-Aid bags had already appeared and dressings were being applied.

"I don't think they need us, Gabrielle."

"What will they do, do you think?"

"Evacuate, I guess. Then they'll do what they always do; they'll come back with a bigger gun."

She slipped the watch into the pocket of her waistcoat and secured the chain through a buttonhole, then patted it with a certain satisfaction. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

I was looking at the frontage of the hotel, shattered, ruined,... its staff flown. “We've got it wrong,” I said.

“Oh?”

“The title of our story. It's not *The last guests*,... but surely the last *days* of La Maison Du Lac.”

She thought for a moment, then took my arm and we made our way back to the pavilion. “No. I prefer *the last guests*,” she said. “You must not change it for anything.”

“But why? It's becoming harder to see how that title makes sense any more – the story is moving so far beyond us now.”

”No. Hold firm to it, Richard. We *are* the last guests. We can't change it now.”

“La Maison looks like it's finished. It looks like the story's over,... but we seem a long way from a conclusion.”

“Then we're wrong, but not about the title, only our interpretation of it.”

Bernadette was waiting on the jetty. She'd watched our return through the field glasses, a torch at the ready to guide us in should darkness have overtaken us. Meanwhile a string of little light-spheres threaded themselves in and out of the pilings, as if curious for news, though Gabrielle joked that they probably understood better than we what had just happened. Then I saw her expression change and become more

thoughtful as she watched Bernadette.

“Why is she here, Richard?”

“What do you mean?”

“She knows something.”

“But what? We would have read it in her. She can't hide anything from us.”

“Perhaps she does not know what she knows, and so does not think to conceal it.”

“That's too complicated,...”

Bernadette looked anxious, crouched down, frowning while nervously biting the inside of her mouth. I managed a wave and a smile, though she must have picked up the empathy bug because my efforts did nothing to cheer her. She caught the line that Gabrielle tossed, and as we came up to the jetty, she asked at once for news of La Maison.

"Everyone has gone," Gabrielle told her. “Only the soldiers and scientists remain now, and the lights are attacking them."

"I heard the explosion," said Bernadette. "I saw the light approaching - it was so big. It made my hair stand on end. I feared for you both."

"We felt it too. We were on the other side of the hotel when it struck. We were perfectly safe."

And then it dawned on Bernadette: "The others have gone? Herr Gruber as well?" She looked stricken.

"We searched," said Gabrielle. "There were only soldiers,.. and scientists."

"They left without me? But where have they gone? And how? Anton? Heinrich? Lagrange? Gunther? Brigid? Stephanie?"

I exchanged a look with Gabrielle. We wanted to reassure her but what could we say? "We saw the soldiers," I went on. "They were not regulars. They were mercenaries – rough, dangerous. Gruber acted for

the best. He wanted to protect you."

She sighed."And now?"

"The soldiers will leave I think. And when they do, we'll leave as well."

She took a breath, then shrugged. It was all the same to her, and none of the options she saw boded well. One of the lights had fluttered up and was dancing around our feet now, like a cat, entwining, seeking attention, seeking comfort. She offered it her hand, drew it up, and there, nestled in her palm she blew upon it, gently, like one blowing upon a dandelion head. The light quivered, its colour vibrating between blue and white, before bursting into an ecstatic display of diamond-like particles which dispersed around us, through us, above us,...

"What does that mean?" she asked, guilelessly.

I was at a loss to answer.

"Are you afraid of it?" asked Gabrielle, to which Bernadette shook her head. "Then it does not matter what it means, whether you understand it or not. You have already made your peace with it. There is nothing more you need to know."

"But how can we face a future when there things like this in it? So many things we do not understand?"

"When has there been a time not filled with things we don't understand? There is always something. It's just that now the unknown is a little more brazen in its teasing. Listen, there *is* a future for us, Bernadette. I am sure of it but we can only understand it intuitively now." Gabrielle gestured with her eyes in the direction of the pavilion,... "The road to a more concrete explanation, as we have all seen, leads nowhere. Those seeking that kind of certainty will not last long in the world that is coming."

"But what if we're attacked, by one of the lights?" said Bernadette. "How do we defend ourselves?"

Gabrielle shook her head and took the girl's arm. "They do not attack. They are attracted by certain things, that is all. Knowing this we understand there is no need to defend ourselves."

Bernadette remained unconvinced and, for the record so did I. "But you, Mr. Graves,... a light sent you into a different future,..."

"For a while, yes"

Gabrielle gave Bernadette's arm a reassuring squeeze. "And had he drowned in the lake that night, he might have stayed in that future. But he did not. I brought him back. There may be a future in which he is drowned. But it is not this one." It seemed Gabrielle was happy to make up the rules of this new age as she went along.

"We should rest," I said. "And eat something. And if the helicopter returns tonight then we'll all go back to La Maison in the morning."

Chapter 40

Though I was never happy to see the annex, returning to it now I felt a pang of regret for its imminent demise. How could it survive, with La Maison abandoned and in ruins? The glitz, the glamour, the celebrity this place must have known! Now it would be left to return to nature – moss and grasses appearing between the neatly laid tiles, algae forming upon the surface of the pool, rendering what was once crystal clear and seductive, opaque and repulsive. Only by our abiding presence and the discipline of our will do we create an illusion of order in the world, I thought. Without us, all our creations are swallowed by the dreamless noise of nature. There is no such thing as immortality here.

I caught myself. Surely I did not think any of this was important now? The people who had graced this private opulence in the past would survive the new order with their style and wealth intact, while the poor of all the cities of Europe would be left to choose between their dignity, and destitution. I was realising, though perhaps too late, the folly of attaching any value to ephemeral things. If it's immortality we seek, we must look for it elsewhere, perhaps even in those timeless zones of subliminal experience my story had begun to hint at.

The soldiers would leave and in their wake, bandits would emerge from the forest to plunder what they could of La Maison's treasures. By then the rains would have entered through the smashed windows and laid waste to its sparkle and its polish. But as Gruber had said the true value of a place like La Maison existed only in the hearts of the people who thought of it - those who had worked there, or lived there. The fabric of it had been constructed, one brick upon the other, long ago, but the essential *meaning* of La Maison was thought into being on a daily basis, carried in the hearts of those who knew it. It still meant something then, even though it no longer existed in a tangible sense. I might have dismissed all of this as idle fancy if it did not trouble me so. We appeared to be facing two choices – one of them a very real struggle for survival in a world gone to hell, and the other? I feared we could not avoid being pulled after it into the oblivion of imagination, so strong was the allure of La Maison.

We prepared a meal of cheeses and salad, and cold meats, and we sat out on the balcony, relaxing with what remained of the wine.

Evening was coming on now and the sun was gentler upon our skins, the three of us still in our La Maison uniforms. We sat quietly. A shyness had come upon us - Bernadette mute, her eyes far away. Gabrielle and I too were reticent in Bernadette's company, the pair of us wondering what to do with her, wondering what she was to mean to us in the world that was coming.

That Bernadette had been bequeathed to us by Gruber made no sense. It was just another of the imaginary dimensions to my story, and implied we had in some way to make a project out of her. She was young, yes, damaged - possibly - but not so young nor so damaged she could not steer her own path. There was little we could offer her other than companionship, and protection if she wanted it. But for all of her reserve that evening, I sensed a contentment, an ease in our company, rather than a *need* of it. This independence of spirit granted her an unknown power over us that we felt growing as the evening shadows lengthened and the sky took on ever deepening shades of amber.

“I thought Gruber had meant to defend La Maison to the death,” I said, suddenly, thinking aloud. “And then he vanishes into thin air. Where could he have gone?”

“Perhaps to the Casa.” said Bernadette.

Her words punctured something in my head and a forgotten line of conversation leaked out from long ago. The daemon that had taken Gruber's form on the night of my vision had spoken of the Casa - The House. I'd thought it merely a Spanish translation of La Maison and thought he was being, I don't know, European and multi-lingual or something, but the daemon had said “La Casa Del Mar”, and Mar is not lake of course, but sea.

“Casa Del Mar!” I said, repeating the daemon's words.

“You know it, Sir?”

“No,... tell me.”

“It's on the island of Ibiza. The Casa stands upon a hill in the centre of a beautiful village, by the sea. Herr Gruber has owned it for many years. It has the potential to become a fine hotel, but he's been biding his time, building it up slowly. We spend the winters there, when we

close La Maison for the season."

Gabrielle could read my mind, and was already doing the calculations. "It's thousands of kilometres to Spain, Richard. To Barcelona, maybe; a city! What are the cities like now? What has the BBC told us? They sound hellish,... why would he take such a risk? And then he must find a boat to the Balearics."

Bernadette shook her head. "Oh,... no Mademoiselle. At the end of the season, we drive south, to Italy. To Genova – it is only 400 kilometres; a full tank of petrol perhaps? And from there it is a boat."

"If they're still running," I said.

"It doesn't matter, Sir. Herr Gruber had his own. It is a lovely old sailing vessel. And it's not beyond him to navigate in the old fashioned way, without computers and such."

"Gruber has a boat!"

Just then the helicopter came in low across the lake. We did not see it, nor did we see it when it departed half an hour later, roaring away in the last of the daylight. We were quiet the whole time, craning our necks for a glimpse of it, not caring if it saw us. Then, when the thwack of its departing rotors died to the silence of the mountains, we wondered if we were finally alone now. And we wondered why we were hiding, why we had chosen this peculiar exile over rescue. It was as if we were hanging on for something, some other mysterious option to present itself - one that everyone else had missed by scurrying away. But what could possibly await the last guests now, with La Maison in ruins?

Later, when the night came on, and a chill came down from the mountains, and the stars came out, we felt the onset of a new season – cold, tending to the darkness of winter, to the days when the first of the snows would venture below the tree line, and when the frosts would turn the earth to iron. Then we would be needing heat, lots of it, or we would not survive.

We sat wrapped in duvets now for warmth, reluctant to retire indoors. Gabrielle and I were huddled together, Bernadette opposite us and we plied her with questions, with prompts for stories that might help us to make sense of the ongoing puzzle of La Maison, and of Gruber.

“Gruber takes his staff with him at the end of each season?” I asked.

“Some, Sir, not all. A caretaker staff remains. Usually Gunther, his wife, a few of the others. The winters are difficult here. The road is cut off with snow for weeks at a time.”

“You go with him ?”

“Oh yes, Sir,... it's where I first met him. On Ibiza.” She glanced away as if reliving old memories. “Not all of my time there was pleasant,... only afterwards, when I met Herr Gruber, and he brought me to La Casa, and after that to La Maison.”

Gabrielle parted her lips and nodded to herself. “Gruber knows you can lead us to it.” She turned to me. “What do you think, Richard? Is Gruber waiting for us in Genova? Waiting for Bernadette to bring us to him, then he can sail us all to Ibiza, maroon us all in paradise with him?”

I felt in my pocket and took out the rotor arm for the Porsche, which Gruber had mysteriously insisted I keep hold of. “It's a possibility” I said, “But only if the police didn't take Gruber's car.”

“But, how could they sir?” said Bernadette. “I mean without this thing?” She gestured to the rotor arm. “No, Herr Gruber had Heinrich and Anton remove it from the courtyard. I know where it is. The police did not take it – they would never have found it.” She brightened. “You are right, Mademoiselle. Why did I not think of this before? He has not abandoned us here! How could I even think it? Herr Gruber has placed a great trust in me and I shall not fail him. I shall lead you to Genova. And there we shall find him waiting!”

I wasn't so sure. “Why didn't he tell you any of this?” I asked her. “Why leave us guessing? He could have written a note or something,... explaining,..”

“There was no time, sir. You don't know what the soldiers were like. He was afraid for me. He sent me away in a hurry.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Perhaps he *did* leave a note,” she said. “It will be in the car. We'll find it in the morning, when we go back to La Maison.”

Could it be true? It made sense, surely? I gave my mind to it and was

granted then a flash of inspiration, a simple route of words that would lead us to the neat conclusion of our story, a conclusion that suddenly didn't seem so very far away now. I even saw myself making an account of it in the journal, while looking out of an upstairs window in a white walled room at the imaginary Casa Del Mar - an azure sea sparking below.

We would cross the lake in the morning, back to La Maison, find Gruber's car, and the note with his instructions, then follow his trail to Genova, where he would be waiting to sail us out into a Mediterranean sunset, to the Balearic islands, and to Ibiza. A little corny so far as endings go, but not without its merits, the least of which it avoided tragedy.

At first I was relieved, having gained at last a glimpse of crystal certainty, but then I realised all of this was just too simple to fit in with what I'd dreamed of last night. Jung had told me in the dream to brace myself for what was coming. He had not spoken of clarity at all, more an inundation of daemonic ambiguity. And that I'd chosen to record this at all suggested it was not without significance. I could therefore only conclude that we would never reach Genova. I said nothing though. The women seemed brighter at the prospect of the coming day and, not wanting to disturb their own dreams that night, I kept my reservations to myself.

Later on, we made what preparations we could, deciding what we might need for such a journey. Then we packed provisions into the rucksacks, also the guns, and the journal. Then we retired.

As we undressed, Gabrielle looked at me and, picking up on my unease, said it would be all right, that the roads were perhaps not beset with bogey men after all, that these were things we'd invented, and we'd do better to imagine a clear run and a glorious drive over the Alps tomorrow, that what we should both wish for was a pleasant day, then we could enjoy the scenery and pretend to be tourists.

I nodded weakly, unable to shake the feeling that our story would not end as we seemed to expect now. I tried to analyse it and, speaking professionally, the only possible plot twist I could come up with at this stage was for Gabrielle and I to lose one another, that the daemons had brought us together and cemented us in this way, for the sole purpose of tearing us apart. I sank down on the bed, stricken by the possibility. That was it! I felt it in my bones. They were going to take her from me.

“Richard, what is it?”

What could I say? I feared losing her more than anything. “If time and space are not what they seem, Gabrielle, then maybe other things aren't what they seem either.”

She shook her head, confused. “Richard?”

“I mean, maybe what seems futile isn't actually so futile after all,... and words,... words that when we speak them seem lost in noise and chaos,... that those words aren't *actually* futile, you know? They're not lost. They're significant in a way we don't see.”

She sank beside me and took my hand. She didn't understand – indeed, I was struggling to understand myself. “All I know,” she said, “is words are cheap, unless we mean them. So,... your words,... do you mean them?”

“Yes,... yes I do. “

“Well then; what are they, these words?... these words you do not want to be lost in the chaos?”

“That I love you. That you complete me. It's not instinct, it's not sex, it's not natural selection, not our selfish genes tricking us into having babies. It's spiritual, psychological, fundamental.

“There's this thing called the world soul, you know? Sometimes you can feel it. And its feel is love. We're immortal creatures, you and I, but we spend long periods in loneliness and longing, and the only way we can connect with the world soul, while we're wearing these skins is by love, and we find that in each other. What I feel for you is the purest expression of that love I've ever known, and I would die if I lost it now. To find one's soul is to find one's self, and I find myself in you,...”

She put a fingertip to my lips to shush me, then stroked my face.

“You will remember, though, won't you?” I persisted. “Remember that I love you, no matter what happens. Even if things turn out,... badly for us,... there may be another reality where we can still be together. We'll meet there if we can. So you see, it's important,... across all realities, what we say and what we believe.”

She nodded. “I believe you love me, you poor man. But now we must sleep. And in the morning we will leave La Maison. You must simply trust that we will be all right. We are human. That's the best any of us can do. And in a few short days, trust me, we shall be browning our skins on the beaches of Ibiza.”

It was enough, I thought, that she believed me. I noted with regret she did not say she loved me in return. It was all right, I'd known it all along, and was happy to live with it, so long as I could be with her and she thought fondly of me. Did I trust that we would be all right? I tried to picture us on the beaches, Gabrielle in a bikini, her pale body bronzed, the sun scattering veins of gold in her hair. No. I did not think for a moment we would ever reach Ibiza. I think she knew it too.

Chapter 41

We set out at dawn, pushing the Kayak onto the glassy water. Then we we paddled out into a thin smear of white mist. Gabrielle sat in the bow, me aft, Bernadette between us, hugging her knees. The pavilion was plainly visible, its domed roof luminous in the first rays of the sun. It looked so beautiful from here, but I could not forget the sorry state we'd found it in yesterday - the litter, the stink of it - and I was determined we would steer our course to land some way off. I did not want to be reminded of the defilement, that unless some miracle could be wrought and La Maison restored, I wanted only to find Gruber's car, and get away from here.

We did not speak, each of us lost, I think, in the contemplation of our separate journeys. Even though it seemed we would be together now for many days, we each saw the adventure from our own perspective, our own universe, with our selves at the centre of it, and part of the uncertainty was in knowing how we could best relate to our companions. Gabrielle was easy for me of course; she was my love, my lover, and still the carrier of the many projections of my soul. But the presence of Bernadette troubled me.

I'd seen her naked. But more than that, she had revealed herself to me, symbolically - so I'd see the marks on her legs, Gabrielle had told me - but she could have shown them to me in other ways, and there was no greater symbol of erotic love than a naked woman, surely? There had also been something proud in the way she'd walked to the pool and dived in, something more of a statement about it. For one apparently so damaged, and so modest, she had suddenly come to possess a remarkable confidence in her own self, her own skin.

She'd been touched by the lights of course, by this mysterious energy, and that explained a lot. It sought you out and changed you in subtle ways, opened up channels to worlds unknown, worlds unseen. It granted you insights, and an eerie sensuality that was truly superhuman. It was this superhuman part of me, I told myself, that found itself intrigued by her, and I hated myself, even as I thought of it, but in truth I could feel Bernadette stealing a part of my soul's projection away from Gabrielle, scooping it up, one gentle handful at a time, and slipping it into her pocket where she would keep it for later.

This was how the daemons in us worked. No wonder the ancient churches had turned their back upon them – labelled them simply “demons”, and decided it was safer to have nothing to do with them at all. But they were forcing their way back into consciousness now,... voices, presences, strange semi-beings we had only to think of and they were granted form. And we had only to drift off for a moment to find ourselves transported to worlds so very like our own, but which were rendered so mind-malleable as to be apparently meaningless. It was the stuff of madness. How could any of us hope to survive it?

We'd crossed barely half way when the light came spiralling up the lake. Gabrielle saw it first, her paddle suddenly trailing limp in the water. I followed suit, wondering if we might be able to judge its course and pass beyond harm's way. Bernadette sat up, suddenly rigid and gripping the sides of the Kayak, her knuckles white.

I placed my hand in the middle of her back to calm her. “Try not to think of it,” I said. “Or we may draw it to us.”

She relaxed into my palm - all the tension draining from her and into me. I could feel it tingling in my arm, so I breathed it in deep, drew it from her, then pushed it deeper still with a long, slow out-breath – pushed it all the way down to the soul of the world. I loved her, felt protective towards her,... it made sense then to think of myself as a father for her, but what came back at me from the soul of the world suggested a different fate, a different meaning. Yet how else could I love her without the desire to possess her?

Meanwhile the light glowed with pearlescent shades of blue, safe colours, and a thing of great beauty, but its timing was not good and, even as I spoke, it seemed to change course and head towards us.

It knew!

It knew we were here!

Bernadette let out a soft whimper. Gabrielle looked back at her, her expression calm, confident. “Don't be afraid,” she said. “Let it come.” Then she looked at me and I swear she smiled, and in her smile there was a challenge. “Now we shall see, Richard.”

Gabrielle's hair was already bushing out with the charged atmosphere. “Take her hand,” she said.

I took Bernadette's hand and Gabrielle took the other. Then the light closed and, as it consumed us, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. remember the light plainly, and the three of us holding hands as the Kayak rocked gently upon the water. There was a whiting out of consciousness, as if in a faint, but I regained my senses after what seemed like only a moment. I was still upright, as if I'd merely tuned out for a moment, and was aware once more of the same gentle rocking of the boat, also the warm press of Bernadette's hand.

We'd been holding on tightly, she and I, expecting at any moment to be agonisingly vaporised, but we were still there pretty much as before, except now all the tension had fallen away leaving us wrapped in an atmosphere of calm grace. Gabrielle had been right! We would not be harmed – either that or I was dead and we'd all passed through to the afterlife, or the underworld, or the fabled summer-lands together.

I looked around. Surely things were not that much different here - I mean from the place we'd left behind. It was the same clear morning, the same mirror stillness of the lake. Were these mere artefacts, then? Pieces of memory? How long would they last? Could I sustain them if I tried hard enough? Or would they fade to blackness eventually? And then what? Would I be no more? It seemed impossible - the sense of my self was so strong now! How could this end? Surely, it was an eternal thing.

The light had gone, moved on, burst, discharged, turned to diamond dust - I don't know. It was all the same, all of it, except,...

Bernadette had turned round in the boat to sit facing me. She was looking steadily into my eyes, and I realised at some point she'd let go of Gabrielle's hand, that she was now holding onto mine with both of hers. And Gabrielle,...

...was no longer there.

Chapter 42

Something was wrong. Obviously. Gabrielle had gone and I was unnaturally calm about it. I was curious even. What did this mean? And surely if I'd had to choose one woman to accompany me into the afterlife, it would have been Gabrielle! So,... this wasn't the afterlife, I decided. It was an hallucination, like the time before, which meant this was not really Bernadette either, and all I had to do was wait a while, then everything would be back to normal.

Whoever or whatever she was, she appeared calm, and in the touch of her hands I felt a benign sympathy.

“Bernadette?” For what else could I call her?

“It's all right,” she said, slowly, her expression kindly, but searching, as if trying to measure my reaction to this impossible transformation. “Everything will be all right. It will soon pass. Breathe.”

I took a breath. The air was fresh and cool. It all felt so perfect, so real.

“Where's Gabrielle?”

“She's all right, Sir.”

I curled my fingers around hers and gave them a gentle, speculative squeeze. She pressed back. I felt warm flesh, felt the softness of her skin. How could this not be real? Across the water I could still make out the pavilion. We were a little closer to it than before and I could even make out the dusty line of the path that led back to La Maison.

“I knew it,” I said. “I knew we wouldn't make it,... I knew things wouldn't end the way we thought. I knew something was going to happen. That we'd be separated. I don't understand. Is it because she doesn't love me?”

Bernadette smiled softly. “Gabrielle?” she pressed my hands. “Even if she did, you would not know it, Sir. It's simply not in her nature to be so open with her secrets. But she adores you. She trusts you. And in a woman as like Gabrielle, I'd describe that as nothing short of a miracle.

What more do you want from her?”

“Nothing,... I want nothing. I know she doesn't love me but I don't care,... so long as I can be with her, do you see?”

“Do you really mean that? If you mean it, surely you would not feel so,... desperate for her love.”

“All right,.. yes. I sound pathetic, insecure,...”

“You set out to rescue her, and you've ended up seeking the meaning of life in her.”

“But,... I thought that was it! The meaning of my life in in her. Exactly.”

“No, she's mortal, sir. You can only go so far in seeking the nature of reality in mortal love. At some point you must wake up and realise that what you want does not exist in her. It exists in me.”

“In you?”

She smiled, and shook her head. “You'll find it's not a literal kind of love, Sir.”

She reached over then and embraced me, overwhelmed me with her innocence,... her softness, and in spite of my love for Gabrielle, I felt a dream-like flowering of love, not exactly for Bernadette, but for something she embodied, a thing far more powerful than the simple lives and desires of me and Gabrielle. It was a thing that swept us up, swept us along, and granted meaning to our lives at the same time as dissolving them into the void. And I remember thinking as she enfolded me that this is all there is, this *feeling*, this overwhelming love. Except there was no *it,* or rather *it* was me and I was *it.*

It had no physical basis, no form. It was its own substance, an infinite living mind capable of infinite expression. It was both everything and nothing, or rather it was the miracle of everything, contained in nothing. And it was me, and you, and Gabrielle, and Gruber, and every one of us at the same time.

I couldn't explain this. It was, as the mystics say unknowable, but equally it was true, and the staggering thing was I had always known it, that the reality we thought we knew, though real enough to us, was a

form of thought, and at a certain level all things are negotiable, malleable, changeable. It was the third step along the road to spiritual awakening, it was the third pebble Jung had handed me – the realisation that there is no other, that *you* are it.

I felt this in Bernadette's embrace, but the nature of it eludes me now. And it was so fleeting. I felt myself waking, because I knew I had dreamed it, knew that I would surface back in reality, already doubting the validity of my experience. But no matter, because Gabrielle would be there once more, and everything would be all right. Because Bernadette had said it would.

Sure enough I came around feeling cool and refreshed,... and naked. I was lying upon a warm flat rock by the lake and as I opened my eyes, I felt the confusion of a man who had been lost in his dreams and was now waking to a reality, the likes of which he could not yet place in time.

Where was I? I sat up with a jolt, snatching at my breath and tried to get my bearings. Why was I naked? Was this no more than a transitory anxiety dream? What would Jung have said: *"Are you so afraid to let people see you as you truly are, Richard?"*

From the edge of my vision I became aware of a figure moving through the trees. It was a young woman, chestnut hair, white sun-frock and sandals. Gabrielle? Thank God! I was ready to call out to her but something held me back, something familiar and yet strange in the scene before me, so that I wondered if I'd woken up properly yet or was dreaming already of something else.

She came down to the water's edge, reached out and bathed her wrists, then her brow, then slipped off her sandals and waded out a little way in order to splash her ankles. The further she waded, the greater was the danger she would see me, so I took the precaution of drawing my discarded trousers across my loins.

My discarded trousers?...

At this point reality finally condensed and I knew where I was – not only where, but *when.* The *where* was the lakeside, the *when* was the morning of the second day after my arrival at La Maison. I'd climbed the grassy knoll in the stagnant silence and the heat, and had returned, filled with an inexplicable anxiety. I'd cooled and soothed myself with a swim, then sat down upon this same rock to dry.

Thus it was I already knew my movement had given me away. I saw it in the sideways flicker of her eyes, and I knew she was pretending not to see. Instead, she looked studiously askance as she waded deeper, lifting her dress a little, so she could venture in up to her knees. And then, after a moment, she turned to me, her eyes filled with a puzzling intensity. It was the look on someone's face when trying to convince themselves to take a leap into the abyss.

I don't know how my expression appeared to her, but what I felt was a profound loss, the loss of everything I had built with her, and confusion that some or indeed all of it might not have been real at all. The dream had swallowed me, turned inside out and become reality itself. It was the cruellest thing and I could not permit it to be true! Yet it *was* true. It *was*! Here we were, reunited, but in a place and a time where Gabrielle did not yet know me.

We were not engaged to be married. We had not defied her parents. Europe had yet to fall, and the daemons of the dream world had yet to break through and overwhelm us. But where was the conclusion, the meaning in that? I could hardly insult my readers this way:

W*e woke up and it had all been a dream!*

Except, we had not really woken up, had we? Rather we had fallen asleep, fallen into a dream from which there would be no waking. This is what Jung warned me of.

"Forgive me, Mademoiselle," I said. "I,... I was swimming. I did not think there would be anyone else around."

Is that how I'd said it before? Did it matter? Could I change things? Did I want to? It seemed inevitable that I would! Yet how could I bear it? Did it mean I had to win her all over again? It would have been a pleasure if I could only have had the confidence I wouldn't screw it up.

She regarded the water, then raised a defiant eyebrow, lifted her dress over her head, and tossed it onto the bank. She wore nothing underneath, and the shock of this filled me with desire. It was not unexpected of course. Indeed I knew I had good reason for my feelings now, having made love to her and felt her touch on so many an occasion these past days. But these were occasions that had apparently never existed, and yet which fuelled the base desire I was now feeling anew for a woman I did not know - yet paradoxically knew better than any other I had ever known.

Was that even possible? Of course it was! Anything was possible in a reality so malleable that anything, *anything at all* , could be changed into anything else. It was a miracle, the miracle of reality, yet it horrified me because surely in a reality where anything could mean anything, the opposite was true, that there was meaning in nothing at all! Whatever we said made it true, if only for ourselves.

I felt my head beginning to swim with the inconsistencies and I made a desperate effort to push them aside, to hold on to something, *anything* firm. You'll wake up, I told myself, so just hang on until then. But whatever the nature of this world, something told me I had to assume it was real, that I had to deal with it. If only I could find the courage! But already my spirits were sinking at the prospect,... my heart quailing.

She turned away, waded a little further out, then lowered herself into the water and began to swim. I gathered my clothes and dressed quickly, pulling on my trousers and my shirt. Was I about to run again? I think I was, but not from Gabrielle this time. She stopped swimming, stood up in the shallows and watched me, rivulets streaming down her chest, her breasts dripping and heaving, her lips parted, her jaw tense, as if she wanted to speak but could not, or dared not, for fear of what she might say. I forced a polite smile, and bowed my head a little in order to take my leave of her, thinking it would prompt her into speaking, as it had before. What was it she'd said at this point?

"*Si vous plais? Attendez!* Please,... wait."

Ah, yes. And I'd replied: "Mademoiselle?"

"*Pouvais vous m'aidez?* Will you help me?"

Was this a second chance then? Was this an opportunity to change the future? But why would I want to? The world had been lost, but amid the chaos Gabrielle and I had found ourselves in each other. Why go back to this point in time and run the risk of ruining it all on one misspoken word?

“How can I help you?”

" My dress,... please! Will you toss it to me?"

"Of course."

I folded it,... once, twice,... it felt warm, electrified, so that my fingers tingled as they brushed the fabric – and yes, all of it was familiar. I was about to toss it to her like before, but waded out instead, until I came within reach of her. She stood firm, unashamed, hands on hips, a defiant look in her eye, a proud indifference in the jut of her breasts. She took the dress, but did not unfold it to cover herself. She'd revealed herself deliberately, was looking at me speculatively, while her hips moved in minute undulations, flirtatiously, perhaps even lasciviously, but also as if she were wondering which way to jump.

I tried to remain passive, but could not hide the hunger in my eyes. I'd been here before, yes, and beyond this point had come to know Gabrielle in many different ways, so that surely as we stood there I should not have felt the same hunger, a hunger of novelty, of newness, of things yet to be discovered between us. Or was this another Gabrielle? Was she another version of the same life, and I was intersecting her world at different point? I felt my heart sinking ever deeper at the thought.

"Can I,... can I,... walk you back to the hotel?" I asked.

“If you wish,” she said.

She slipped the dress back over her head and pulled it down with some difficulty as it clung to her wet skin. Eventually she was satisfied it covered her properly, though by now somewhat transparently, and we waded ashore, then walked slowly back along the lake path. I wondered if she'd had second thoughts about asking me that question, and certainly as we walked she seemed to have forgotten it, unless she was gathering her courage. I wondered about prompting her, but sensed the future was finely balanced, that I had better let her take the lead, or I risked ruining everything.

We came to the pavilion, and here we paused. For all of my panic and despair to find myself caught up in this, my worst nightmare, I was at least relieved to see the pavilion restored to its romantic glory. The soldiers and the filth was at least consigned to that other version of this story - alas the version in which my true love now resided. Here, there was only this,... what was she? A simulacrum? I looked at her, aching for the loss of our intimacy, aching too for the loss of her awakening, an awakening I had been witness to.

This Gabrielle was still locked in her trap, still shaking at the bars and begging strangers to turn the key. She knew nothing of what might

have been,... while I seemed to know everything. We'd been engaged to be married, this stranger and I, but how could I even begin to explain that to her? It sounded ridiculous. All she wanted was someone to give her a ride. It would take a time of madness for us to mean anything to each other again, and this had the feeling of an ordinary world.

"There is something I would like to ask you," she said at last. "But it would be too much, I suppose - too much to ask of anyone."

Ah!... then she *was* going to ask me. But how to react? "Please, Mademoiselle, ask anyway. You never know."

She sighed, then shrugged as if it did not matter, that it was an impossible request, but that she might as well ask anyway: "When you leave La Maison," she said, "will you take me with you?"

I was about to reply, but hesitated a moment and she took this as a bad sign, then jumped in with a hasty argument in order to convince me: "Listen, I am not proposing marriage you know? But I've seen the way you look at me and it's enough."

"You misunderstand, Mademoiselle. I think you're very beautiful,... but,... if I had any intentions at all,... I assure you, they would be honourable."

She was surprised by this, her eyes widening a fraction. "That is all the better. It tells me I am not making a poor choice with you."

"Mademoiselle,..."

"I am Gabrielle, and you are Richard,... and people who have seen each other naked should be on first name terms don't you think?"

They were the same words, but taken from different points in time, woven together differently. Were words the key then? Was language the material from which had been constructed all the patterns that lay within us? And across time, across all the possible ways of being, were the patterns the same, all striving for the best possible fit? And what did any of that mean? Come on Richard, one step at a time!

"Yes,... first name terms," I said. "But, Gabrielle,... your parents?"

"Ah, of course," she said. "That is the only condition. You would have to take me far away from them. I don't suppose this would be a difficult thing for you? It does not matter where we go."

"But,... what you're suggesting,... it wouldn't solve anything. You must see that!" I spoke these last words half heartedly, a wooden actor, no longer believing in his lines, and conscious only of how strange his voice sounded while he spoke them.

"On the contrary, Richard, I think that it would solve everything for me."

I was about to say it wouldn't solve anything for me, but I knew differently,... that it *would* solve everything, or rather that it had once revealed the direction of my life's path, only to have the way closed now by a mischievous and inscrutable daemon, one of the old gods, possibly even Mercurius himself temporarily masquerading as a young waitress called Bernadette.

"I understand how you might think it an inconvenience," she went on. "But in return I can be for you whatever you want me to be. I have spent my life being what others want, you see? You are a man,... you decide what you want, and I can pretend to be it."

What had I said before at this point? Ah yes: "I'd want you to be yourself, Gabrielle."

And she replies: *"Of course, and when I find myself I will let you know and be that also, if it pleases you. So we are agreed? Oui?"*

I was still struggling to divorce myself from the greater part of what had already passed between us, struggling to pare it back down to this fledgeling moment, this apparently fresh beginning, trying to summon the courage to go on in the knowledge that this alternative path could not possibly lead to anything more important than what had already been lost.

"I plan to leave on Saturday," I said. "I'm going to drive to Italy, to Genova, possibly, then get a boat out to the Balearic islands. To Ibiza. You're welcome to come with me."

I don't know if this was correct. I was trying to maintain some continuity with the pattern of things that had gone before, but then I wondered if I should be thinking of something else for fear the gods would be angry

with my lack of imagination.

I don't think she heard the downhearted tone in my voice, the disheartened sigh. Instead she gasped in triumph at her success in apparently landing me. “Really?“

“Yes. And perhaps in the mean time, we could,... get to know one another a little?”

She looked away, something evasive in her eyes which narrowed momentarily into defensive slits. “There'll be plenty of time for that on the road,” she said. “Until then, I'd rather my parents didn't suspect anything. If they were to see us together,...” she shrugged as if it should be obvious why she could not reward me with her company.

“Of course. I understand. You don't want to arouse their suspicions.”

“You think it strange perhaps,... a woman of my age, so closely watched by her parents?”

“It's what drew me to you, Gabrielle. But really I do understand.”

“You wanted to rescue me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“So you could imprison me yourself?”

Woa! That was different. She'd not said that before. “No. I don't think so. I want to set you free.”

She smiled knowingly, as if she'd heard that line before and believed not a word of it. “Truly, I shall show you how grateful I can be, Richard,” she promised. “But for now we must keep it a secret. *Oui*?”

If I'd not known her any better, I might have felt like a naïve fool, being lured into a trap with promises of her divine comforts, promises that would never materialise. But even if it were true of this version of Gabrielle, I could not object to it, and would therefore take my punishment like a man. If my role this time were merely to set her down on the road somewhere, and let her go, then so be it.

“My car will be around the back of the hotel on Saturday morning,” I

said. “I'll be there at nine. I'll wait fifteen minutes, then I'll be gone.”

“I'll be there,” she said. Then she left, having made me promise not to follow, reminding me that we could not be seen together.

So I let her go on ahead, then returned to La Maison some minutes later, by a different route. This time there was no Signor De Luca shaking his watch and asking me for the time. My intuition had been correct then; this would be a more ordinary version of reality, one in which the fact that Gabrielle and I were lovers had become an impossible fantasy, yet one in which I was to be haunted at every turn by how very passionate and warm a lover she could be.

Chapter 43

I was sitting in the hotel lobby, listening to passing gossip, and to the telephone conversations of Monsieur Lagrange, hoping to get my bearings from them. Thus it was I knew the Eyjafjallajokull volcano was still erupting in Iceland, that there were no flights anywhere in the northern hemisphere, but at least the clock over Lagrange's desk kept time. The hotel was also intact of course, and not the blown out ruin of only yesterday. I was both dazed and comforted by this. I was also grateful, as one sometimes is in dreams for the miraculous restoration of something that was once important to you. If only I could arrange for the same miracle to be worked over Gabrielle and me.

“Monsieur Lagrange,... you managed to get the clock working?”

“Ah yes, Mr. Graves, it was wanting only a new battery. My watch was the same. A coincidence no?”

“The universe getting personal,” I replied.

“Yes. But what could be the meaning of it?”

“In my experience we'll probably never know.”

He laughed at what he took to be my joke, though I'd said it in all seriousness, and he went on tapping merrily at his computer, taking bookings and answering e-mails. I'd given up thinking, or hoping I would wake up from this. I was here for the long term it seemed. Yet neither could I fully accept that any of this was real. Or had the previous reality been the bigger dream? Had I fallen asleep by the lake that day and dreamed the fantasy of the lights, and of Gabrielle? Was this not the more stable reality?

I'd not been up my room yet. Indeed I feared to, assuming by now the laptop and memory stick would be intact and all of my old stories available for reference once more. This pained me more than when I thought I'd lost them. I'd come so far, and this seemed a backward step now. It couldn't be real. It couldn't! I did not want my old stories, my old life any more. I wanted Gabrielle!

What was I missing here?

Love. Goodness. Grace. An infinity of bliss. The base frequency of the universe itself! That's what Bernadette had conveyed when she'd embraced me. She'd showed it to me. Taken me there. And she was right, it was an emotion that had haunted me all my life – the holy grail of all Romantics. Was that it? Was she saying this feeling was to be found only in the realm of the gods? That you could not project it onto a mortal woman and expect it to last.

I toyed with a La Maison pencil, twirling it in my fingers, thinking of the journal I'd kept these past days and which was now apparently consigned to another reality, sitting in a Kayak, bobbing about on a lake, somewhere and some-when, in the void, a forgotten thought in the all embracing mind of God. I'd thought I was getting somewhere with it. I'd thought it was really leading me somewhere. How could it simply be gone?

I could try to reproduce it I suppose, hack it out on the laptop, but there'd been so much of it and I couldn't hope to capture every subtle nuance simply by dragging it from memory. For a journal like that to mean anything it had to be written while the experience was still fresh, while you were still tingling from it. And none of it would be real now; those events, as stunning and as beautiful, as remarkable and unsettling as they'd been to me, could never be anything more than a fantasy in this place. They could never be *true*.

“Can I get you anything, sir?”

It was Bernadette, fresh, starched, and immaculately uniformed. *Bernadette?* I looked at her more closely than I might have done ordinarily, and she drew back a fraction, perhaps afraid. I had to remind myself of the probable difference between Bernadette, the person, *this* person, and the Bernadette who had apparently brought me here, the daemonic Bernadette, intermediary of the gods.

“Is,... everything all right, Sir?”

“I'm sorry. I,... didn't mean to stare. I was just thinking,... of something else. Never mind. I could probably use a pot of very strong coffee.”

“My pleasure, Sir. I'll bring it right over.”

She curtseyed, then gave me a smile and a wink in the old playful way, but I didn't know if this was a continuation of our game or a signal that

she acknowledged her complicity in something,... indeed that she *knew* something. This confused me. Who was she? Person? Daemon? Or both?

“Oh, and Bernadette?” I said, thinking quickly. “Would you bring it to me in the garden?”

“Of course, Sir. I'll find you.”

With that she went on her way, and I set out to explore the garden. It wasn't exactly the same as I remembered it. There were flower beds where once there had been only lawn, and instead of the gardens running down to the lake's natural shingle shore, they'd been extended to form a stone jetty. There were mooring posts, as if for boats, but there were no boats on the lake, were there? I looked at the flowers – all late flowering perennials. I'd arrived at La Maison at the turning of spring into early summer, but the season now was already well advanced – late August or September, surely? Indeed the season, so far as La Maison Du Lac was concerned, was apparently nearly over.

I found a table in a secluded corner and settled down. I wanted to make sure that when Bernadette came outdoors with the coffee we could be alone and unobserved for a while. I wasn't sure how one could go about testing for what I suppose I had to call daemonic possession, but in the end I needn't have worried.

“There you are,” she said. She set down the silver jug, but instead of pouring, she pulled out a chair and sat beside me. “I know I asked you before,” she said, leaning close and lightly touching my arm. “But we're alone now and you can be honest with me. Are you all right?”

I felt a numbness, part joy, part fear as I realised I was not alone in this place after all, not alone with the knowledge of losing my way, of somehow skittering across time-lines, while retaining the forbidden facts of each. Bernadette knew it too - at least this version of her knew it, the one I was making up. But how could she be real and made up at the same time?

“I'm puzzled,” I said. “And missing Gabrielle.”

She appeared to be in no hurry and simply enjoyed the view for a while. The air carried with it a whisper of the snowy tops which took the deadness out the heat, and there was an optical clarity to it, bringing

mountains that lay fifty kilometres away, impossibly near, every crag and fissure revealed in intimate detail. She breathed in, then exhaled slowly and as she did so I swear the scene shimmered, mirage fashion, or like the image of something reflected in the surface of a lake.

“Do you like the changes here?” she said.

“You mean the garden? The jetty? Yes,... it's all very pretty.”

“Yet at the same time it disappoints you,” she observed.

“I'm afraid it does, yes.”

“But it's so beautiful,... and safe. The world is as it was, Sir, the day you first arrived at La Maison. All is in order. There are no bandits, La Maison is restored,... and Monsieur Lagrange informs me the stock market is on the rise.”

“Yes. All of it sickeningly normal.”

“And on Saturday you can drive to Genova with Mademoiselle, like you always planned. Without hindrance. You can just steal her away.” She had a blissful look about her now, and she hugged herself. “It will be so romantic, Sir.”

“Except it's not Gabrielle, is it?”

“How can it not be Gabrielle?”

“She's different here.”

“More calculating perhaps? But can you blame her, after what she's been through? Take heart, Sir. These are different times, that's all. You're projecting nothing of yourself onto her. Nor she onto you. Neither of you is under any illusion regarding the nature of the other.”

“But if this is it,... I mean,... if this place is truly ordinary, then we don't stand a chance. Gabrielle once said to me that we should pray we never find normality again. And it's only now I realise what she meant. Normality crushes us.”

“Why would it?”

“Because it has no use for people like me and her.”

“Oh,... that's not true, Sir.”

“Isn't it?”

“The world cannot help but identify with you. The world is myth. It is a story. I am what? Pixie... Elf,... the servant of him you call Mercurius? Would that also be Herr Gruber, Sir? For who else is he, but the alchemist himself? Sage, Guru of La Maison? And are you not his materials? Are you not hero and heroine? Ego and Soul, brought together in a work of amalgamation, of sublimation, of transformation? He perfects himself through you. And since this is *your* story sir, who else is Herr Gruber, but a reflection of your own self? And what is La Maison but your own invention?”

She took up the silver pot and poured coffee.

“You mean to keep me here then,” I said. “in this pared down version of my story.”

“Actually, you keep yourself here, Sir. And it's hardly pared down. It's as vibrant and as real as any other time and place you might encounter.”

“Simpler then.”

She gave me a knowing smile. “If you think it's simpler here, then you're not looking at it properly and you're in for a surprise.”

“Thanks, but that doesn't really help. Where is she? Where is Gabrielle?”

“I believe she's in her room, sir.”

“No, that's Gabrielle as I knew her a week ago. I mean the one we were sitting in the Kayak with about an hour ago. *My* Gabrielle, the Gabrielle I am engaged to marry.”

“She's the same, sir.”

“She's only the same to the version of myself that has no knowledge of what's happened between us.”

“Ah,... good point. Then an insight such as this is not always a blessing, is it?“ She gave a shrug, apparently both delighted and mystified. “It depends what you do with it, I suppose.”

“But we were getting somewhere. I was sure of it. We'd only to cross the water back to La Maison,...”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am,... *without her*!”

“Here you are lamenting the loss of something. But is it not better to lament that loss, than go your whole life not knowing it even existed?”

I groaned at the implications of what she seemed to be saying. “I'll never get her back, will I? She and I'll always be crossing that lake, and you between us. You're right, all of this has something of the air of a myth about it.”

“All stories are myths, sir. They're the retelling of patterns,... thoughts, emotions. The trick is in seeing the pattern, rather than getting yourself too involved with the words, or even a coherent telling. The best myths make sense even when told back to front and upside down. Once you know the story.”

“And do I know the story?”

“Of course you do.”

“I'd a feeling you were going to say that.”

“You've merely forgotten it. Have patience. It'll come back to you. And with it, so will Gabrielle.”

We watched then as the Lafayettes appeared - Monsieur, Madame, and Mademoiselle - and they sat down at a table some way off. They didn't see us, but Bernadette wasn't for taking any risks, and rose so that she stood by me in a more waitressy fashion. Gabrielle, as ever, was shrunken between her parents, her eyes down-turned, her shoulders hunched.

“Oh,... but she looks so empty,” said Bernadette. “Have things really changed so much? You *must* help her, sir. She looks so sad. I'll see if I

can get them anything.” She set off, across the grass, her pad in hand, thumb repeatedly clicking her silver pen to a thoughtful rhythm. Then she remembered something, paused and called back to me: “By the way sir, Herr Gruber was hoping you'd join him for dinner this evening?”

Gruber! Just when I'd thought things couldn't get any more complicated, I was summoned to the table of the master alchemist himself!

“Tell him I'm looking forward to renewing our acquaintance, in this version of reality.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. Just tell him I'll be delighted.”

Chapter 44

Being tucked a little out of the way, Gruber's table afforded some privacy in the dining room. When I came down that evening the guests looked up at me as if wondering at my boldness: the lone little Englishman ignoring his insulting table by the kitchen doors, and being escorted instead by the imperious head-waiter, Anton, to the most coveted table in the room.

Their looks did not trouble me. I treated them with the air of a detached observer, as in a dream, for I had still not yet fully convinced myself of the reality of this apparently ordinary place. Gruber rose, real enough, and bowed formally as he greeted me. He wore his usual white suit, and his gold watch-chain gleamed in the soft evening light. There was something kindly about him, as always, and though I had no idea who or even what he was - projection, daemon, figment, or man - I wanted to trust him. Surely no one so charismatic and winning could be dangerous,... unless,... unless you were insincere, unless you thought to get the better of him, to cross him! Yes, that would be a foolish thing to do, a thing for which you'd be made to suffer. I prayed I would always remain on the right side of him.

“I'm pleased you could join me, Mr. Graves.”

“The pleasure is mine, Herr Gruber. It's very decent of you, taking pity on a lone traveller this way.”

He smiled roguishly. “Nonsense my boy. Please, sit down.” And then, as we consulted the menus: “You see how they envy you this evening? Why, even the Lafayettes are wondering about your status now. Tell me did you enjoy your walk this morning?”

My walk? My walk? Ah,... the one involving the little swimming place on the lake, recommended by Lagrange, and immediately reported to Gruber.

“I did, yes. I also presume you conspired to bring about my encounter with Gabrielle, by the lake this afternoon?”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Naturally,” he said, then changed the subject. “This volcanic eruption,... what a dreadful business! The reports are saying it could go on for months. What do you make of it?”

“It's proving to be inconvenient. Still,... it could be worse.”

“Oh?”

“There might be,... I don't know,... any number of natural disasters bigger than this. A massive solar flare for example, reacting with the volcanic ash cloud to create an electromagnetic pulse. Such a thing,... were it to happen,.... it might knock out anything with a computer chip in it, paralyse the whole of the northern hemisphere. Can you imagine that?”

I studied him as he formulated his reply. He seemed without guile, though he puzzled upon it for a while until his face lit up. “Ah!” he said: “The plot for your new story? But it doesn't sound like your kind of thing, Mr. Graves - also a little far fetched if you don't mind my saying.”

“Yes, isn't it? However, was it not you who told me that if we wish for a serene life, then we must first think serene thoughts, and if it is the extraordinary we seek, then we must not be afraid to think extraordinary things?”

“Yes,... yes,... though at the time I was suggesting,...”

“I know what you were suggesting. And you were right; I've been thinking about it, and I *will* rescue Gabrielle – or at least I shall attempt it. And who knows,... if she's willing,...”

He slapped the table in triumph sending up a jingle of silverware which caused a momentary and pointed lull in the murmur of background conversation. “This is wonderful news!” he said, then he seemed to doubt the evidence of his own ears and, lowering his voice to a whisper, he went on: “You do mean, *actually* rescue her, don't you?... and not in a fanciful, psychological way?”

“There's nothing psychological about it,” I reassured him, unable to smile at the irony if it – for it seemed everything was psychological now, reality itself having become as it were, a dream in the mind of the world's soul. “Not unless all of this is some sort of elaborate fantasy?”I added.

He shook his head, apparently not understanding my meaning, which suggested to me that whatever this reality was, it was at least real to Gruber, or rather to this version of him.

“She's asked if she can come with me when I leave,” I told him.

“And you've agreed?”

“We're heading for Genova on Saturday, all being well, and her parents remain in ignorance of our plans of course.”

“Genova? A curious destination, though a lovely drive,...”

“I thought to try Ibiza. I believe there's a boat. I've had a hotel recommended to me. The Casa del Mar?”

I was still testing him.

He frowned. “I know of a Casa Del Mar on Ibiza. In fact I'm in the process of buying it, but it's a dreadful place at the moment, neglected by its current owners for years, and I wouldn't recommend it, at least not until I've had a chance to lick it into shape, you know? But there must be so many hotels by that name. I'm sure it's not the same one. Can I ask what brought about this change of heart?”

“Shall we say I've slept on it?”

“Then I wish you well. But as regards a commercial sailing, from Genova, you'll most certainly need to connect with Barcelona. I keep a boat myself at Genova, you know?”

“Really? I didn't take you for a sailing man, Herr Gruber.”

“Oh yes. You must come out with me sometime. I know the Mediterranean quite well,... all of its secret places. Perhaps you and Mademoiselle Lafayette?”

“It's very kind of you. And tempting. But I'm not sure we're at that stage yet,... possibly when we're married?” I watch him for a reaction.

He smiled, perhaps assuming I was being ironic.

“So,” I pressed on. “You don't sail to Ibiza in your boat, at the end of the season?”

He thought on this. “What a charming idea, Mr. Graves. It is the Romantic in you, no doubt. But no, alas – one would normally fly. It's

such a short hop from Zurich, though quite impossible now of course, and for the remains of the summer one would expect. But, why not check with Monsieur Lagrange? He's the font of all knowledge when it comes to travel arrangements."

"Perhaps I'd better. Herr Gruber, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Is there anyone staying at the annex just now?"

This surprised him. "You know about the annex?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to mention it,... I wasn't sure how secret a place it was."

"Well,... I wouldn't describe it as secret – but it's true not many people know about it. Not even guests who have been coming here for years."

"Shall we say I have my sources then? But is there anyone there at the moment?"

"Not at the moment," he said cautiously. "Though I'm expecting an arrival shortly,... it rather all depends on,.... how things develop. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to visit it. Would that be possible do you think?"

"Of course." He thought for a moment. "Gunther has a boat, but it's rather an awkward thing to handle. There's also a Kayak which may be better for you. Yes, that's best. I'll ask him to leave it down by the pavilion in the morning, shall I?"

"Actually, I was thinking I'd go this evening."

"As you wish."

"And if someone could leave a lantern burning in the pavilion to guide me back after dark?"

"A wise precaution. I'll tell Gunther to see to it. Do you intend going alone?"

"You mean do I intend inviting Gabrielle? It would be the perfect

trysting place I suppose, but I doubt she'd accept. It's important her parents don't get wind of our plans, you see? I've discovered they're capable of doing just about anything to ward off potential knights in shining armour."

"Oh,... I wouldn't worry," he said. "I'm sure your growing celebrity, coupled with their incurable curiosity will help them overcome their Anglophobia. I was saying to Madame Lafayette only this afternoon what a famous author you are, how your Inspector Grantley is practically a household name in England."

I was aware of a figure hovering in the periphery of my vision now. She materialised more fully when Gruber raised his brows as a signal for her to draw near. She stood by him, and for a moment I imagined he was about to put his arm about her waist. He didn't of course, but I sensed now the deep bond between them. It wasn't blood, it wasn't sex,... it was something much, much deeper. It was also old. Eternal. They were gods. And as my consciousness swam with this new vision, I felt in awe of them.

"You've met Bernadette?"

She gave a curtsey and readied her pad, thumb poised to click her pen. "Mr. Graves and I are already well acquainted Herr Gruber."

"That's a lovely watch, Bernadette," I said, noticing the Cartier glittering. She looked at me, and began clicking thoughtfully. "Thank you, Mr. Graves. It is unlike a man to notice such details."

"Now, Bernadette," chided Gruber. "We mustn't tease Mr. Graves. He's driven to La Maison all the way from England, in search of the meaning of life, no less. We must treat him with respect."

"Or with sympathy Herr Gruber?"

He smiled indulgently. "I mean, we must look after him."

"Naturally. I will take special care of him for you." She gave me a flirtatious twinkle, then she asked if we were ready to order.

The menu was reassuringly diverse. At least I would not be growing bored of lake-caught trout.

“There's everything here but fried lotus leaves,” I mused

He smiled indulgently. “I'm sure even that mythical little delicacy can be arranged, if it's a particular favourite of yours.”

“Ah, no, Herr Gruber. Not at all. My stay at La Maison this year has already been such a memorable one, I should not like to forget it.”

“Of course, legend would have it the lotus dissolves the travellers desire to return home!They become forgetful of their quest. Speaking as an an hotelier, it is a state of mind I should be inducing in all of my guests.”

“And speaking as a guest who one day intends finding his way back home, I shall have the soup and the steak.”

“An excellent choice. I shall join you if I may. And we'll be needing rather a strong red wine to go with that, Bernadette.”

I watched Bernadette leave with our order, watched her weaving through the tables until my eye was distracted by the Lafayette trio. Monsieur and Madame looking pointedly at me, while Gabrielle studied the table top, her head bowed, as if holding up a crushing weight. Madame turned quickly away, apparently distracted by the untidiness of Gabrielle's table setting, and began fussing with it. When I looked back, Gruber was staring at me, his features set, his expression grave.

“I know what you're thinking,” he said.

“Oh?”

“How does a young girl, and a waitress at that, afford such a watch?”

“Actually I wasn't thinking any such thing. Inspector Grantley may have been curious about it, and being a logical sort of man, lost for an explanation. An eighteen carat, white-gold wristwatch? They don't grow on trees do they? I also presume the sparklers embedded around the dial are *not* zirconia? I imagine you'd get little change from twenty thousand pounds for a watch like that. Truly beautiful! Breathtakingly ostentatious. Curious indeed, thinks Inspector Grantley – it's the sort of watch a princess might wear on a state occasion. But my intuition,... a thing unknown to the calculating Grantley tells me it was simply a gift, from you, though no less mysterious for all of that.”

He feigned surprise. “And you would be correct. So, to the mystery of it; you're wondering what sort of employer would bestow such a gift on one of his lowliest employees?”

“Bernadette is clearly not lowly. Nor are any of your staff, Herr Gruber. They play their roles here, as do you, but behind your charming masks you are all gods, and La Maison is your Olympus. Therefore the mystery is insoluble. It is the conundrum faced by all mortals when trying to make sense of the motives of the gods. We see them, we feel them,... but we can never know them.”

Gruber's expression remained solemn. “And what do you know of the gods, Mr. Graves?”

I looked once more at the hemmed in figure of Gabrielle and my heart ached for her. “Only what I've heard in stories and glimpsed in my dreams,” I told him.

“Are we speaking of the one great God of the western world?”

“You mean Capitalism?”

He smiled patiently. “I mean the Christian God. Or is it the pagan pantheon you refer to?”

“The pantheon, I think. A god, or goddess for all occasions, for all humours. A world where every mortal whim, vice or virtue is ascribed to the projection of one god or another.”

“And which god do you favour? Aphrodite, perhaps?”

“Goddess of love? Ah,... if only. But I've never sought love, Herr Gruber. Indeed, I've never consciously courted the gods at all, yet I fancy Mercurius is stalking me now.”

“Ah! Mercurius, the Roman deity if I'm not mistaken? And well chosen. Known also to the Greeks as Hermes the thrice great? And to the Egyptians before that as Thoth?” He nodded in approval. “You speak of the master architect. The master alchemist. You say you have never courted the gods, Mr Graves, yet you seem to have done nothing else since abandoning the narrowness of your Grantley stories, and embarking on your psychological quest. We should perhaps be careful what we ask for.”

“But,.. Mercurius? He's far too slippery a character. I feel it's another myth I'm needing.”

“How so?”

“To put it simply, the gods have banished my lover to the underworld, Herr Gruber, and I would gladly risk all to fetch her back. Except I don't know how to begin. Perhaps you might advise me?”

Gruber nodded sagely, thinking he would enter into my game: “Actually, you're mistaken, Mr Graves. Mercurius *can* help you. He is the natural ally of all the true romantic visionaries. He's also one of the few gods capable of navigating his way into the other-world.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. It's possible for a mortal to pass through. After all, the stories tell us so. But they follow a similar pattern: the pilgrim receives instruction from a friendly god, and he must then obey those instructions to the letter. But the stories also tell us that mortals cannot help but disobey in some small detail, something they consider to be insignificant, or they are easily tricked, distracted from their resolve,... and they are torn apart as a result of it, or the object they seek to recover, their lover, usually, or their wife, or a beloved, in all cases symbolic of their soul,... is snatched away from them at the last minute, snatched back into the darkness.”

“Then I'd better be careful. But please, humour me; if you were,... I don't know,... Mercurius, and I'd proved myself worthy of you, how would you advise me?”

He drew closer, resting his chin on his steepled fingers, and he closed his eyes for a moment, as if to seriously consider the problem. “First you must cross the river Styx,” he said. “Charon will be your ferryman, a tricky character by all accounts, and like as not he'll try to drown you on the way – simply in order to make sure you are not mortal, for only the dead may pass, and only the dead are immune to being drowned of course.” He smiled. “On the other side you must face Cerberus, the three headed dog. It guards the portals to the other-world - a fearsome beast, but he can be charmed, or slain by brute force if you have the strength for it. From there my knowledge is vague I'm afraid, and you'll have to make it up as you go along.”

“The journey sounds familiar. I've already been I think. And you're right, it was the crossing back that was my undoing, though for the life of me I don't know what I did wrong.”

“Oh?”

“How did I disappoint the gods, Herr Gruber?”

“Perhaps you didn't, Mr. Graves. Not everyone is granted the insight to undertake such a journey as the one you're proposing. But tell me where did you find the underworld? Would you be thinking it was the annexe?”

“Not literally,... figuratively perhaps. The underworld is not a place. It is not a *where*. It is more a state of mind, and exploring it is simply a question of gaining the right perspective. A mortal cannot go there, not literally, but only in the language of his dreams. The difficulty lies perhaps in not waking up too soon, or if one's already awake, then in falling asleep,... it also lies in knowing the difference between waking and sleeping, or accepting that there's no practical difference at all for the purposes of one's enquiry.”

He smiled, but there was something evasive in it. “You're speaking in psychological riddles again, Mr. Graves. It worries me you might be falling back upon your earlier position regarding a metaphorical rescue of Mademoiselle Lafayette, rather than a physical one?”

I shook my head in defeat. “I can't really rescue her.”

This puzzled him. “I thought the two of you had arranged to,...”

“Yes,... yes,... but, putting it crudely, she promises to lie with me at some point between here and Genova, if I will take her with me,... except I know she intends no such thing, and will leave me at the first opportunity. So,... it would not be a rescue, you see? It would be to deliver her back into the fire.”

“The fire?”

“She's made escape attempts before – perhaps you're unaware of this - and they've not ended well. When granted unlimited freedom she has a tendency towards self destruction.”

“Ah,... but the same can be said of us all. Forgive me Mr. Graves, you sound as if you know her better than you're letting on,... as if you've already met?”

“We have, yes, “ I said, then went on, though mainly for my own benefit: “Unless this is another Gabrielle entirely,... a different incarnation, so to speak, a different version of her self who's not yet tried the same pathways. Are my insights real or delusional then? This is very confusing and I beg you to forgive me, Herr Gruber; it must seem strange to you, though looking at her I can't help seeing the same story written in her face, and in the weary sag of her shoulders, and if that's true then Gabrielle possesses a self-destructive streak born of desperation and the erosion of all self-worth. Therefore any hand she accepts will be a hand of her own choosing and on her own terms, also a hand she'll think nothing of slapping away once she's done with it.”

Gruber considered my words carefully. “Let's assume your insights are correct,” he said. “But all of your reservations are void if you can touch her heart. To touch a woman's heart changes everything.”

“It won't happen.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because this,... reality is far too ordinary for such an extraordinary thing as that.”

He leaned back, apparently bewildered, and as he did so the watch chain slid from his waistcoat pocket where he'd evidently tucked it in order to maintain appearances, but there was no watch to attach it to, the fact of which I was quick to notice.

“Your watch, Herr Gruber?”

“Ah,... yes. I seem to have misplaced it.”

I felt the air move. I felt a warm zephyr on the back of my neck as realities crossed, merged, and symbols were exchanged. Had he misplaced it? Or had he given it away? And if he'd given it, had he given it freely, or been pressed? A man like Gruber, I thought,... he'd be difficult to press. Press him and he'd turn to smoke and reappear behind you in another guise. If he'd misplaced the watch, then he'd

done so deliberately, with the intention of its finding a way back to him, and of bringing with it whomever was fated to pick it up, and to understand it for what it was.

“I'll be sure to keep my eyes open for it,” I promised.

“I'd be much obliged,” he said.

I remembered the mantel clock from the other version of my story, remembered how Gruber and I had used our watches to split the difference of our respective times and set the time of La Maison accordingly. With a peculiar insight, one akin to madness, I saw that without his watch, Gruber had given up control of his side of the equation, causing the story to lose its coherence, it's gravity - for surely we'd been in in free-fall ever since? Bernadette was right; this was not an ordinary reality at all. The extraordinary was revealed simply by the way you looked at things.

Chapter 45

After dinner, I did not go immediately to the annex. I was afraid to, and had decided against it for now. The light was fast fading, and suddenly the thought of being out on the water alone, in the darkness, was terrifying to me. Also, the wine at dinner had muddled my head – either that or sharpened it for seeing in another dimension, for I had begun to think now of extraordinary things.

I sat out in the garden, wondering if Gabrielle would find a way to come stealing across the lawns to me as she had done once before, in another time, another life,... after the night of the dance. Then we'd talk in that unguarded way and I'd invite her to the pavilion where we'd make love under the stars. Or at any rate, I'd speak to her there, and win her heart all over again, because surely Gruber was right, I thought: *to win a woman's heart changes everything*. But she didn't come, and I felt spurned. Worse than that, it was all I could do to stop myself from hating her.

It was hard to even to *like* this version of Gabrielle; she'd blatantly flaunted her body, used it as cheap bait, then offered it to me at some future time, a time I knew would never come, that somewhere on the road she'd find a way of disappearing and making her own way, possibly ruining herself in some debauched life-style as she had once before. I saw her as a woman of easy virtue, a woman who had once sold herself as a porn star. What else did I expect? She was probably impossible to help. There was not a sympathetic bone in her body, nor a wise thought in her head. She was no longer my muse,... and how I *missed* her.

Bernadette came to me as I sat thinking on this, her pad poised, her pen clicking in an almost sinister readiness. But for what? To take my order? To do my bidding?

“Can I get you anything, Sir?”

“No, I'm beginning to think I've had quite enough already. But perhaps you could tell me something?”

“Try me.”

“How do I get out of here?”

“Oh,... that. I really don't know.”

“But you brought me here.”

“No sir,... you brought *us*. It's your story, remember. Oh, please don't look that way,... I can't bear it. That's the thing with you mortals. You're all the same. You're unable to take responsibility for anything that happens to you. You're unable to grasp the simple notion that everything you see about you is exactly the way you want it, whether you know it or not!”

I stared at her, amazed at the ease with which she could be transformed. One moment she was this slight figure, this pale skinned, elfin, dark haired girl, and the next she was infinitely wise and knowing – a princess among the gods - so swiftly, so suddenly did I possess her.

“You told me it wouldn't last long.”

“But that was in the boat,” she said, nonplussed. ”It was a half way thing, *obviously*. I caught you there, held you back a moment,... just to prepare you. But then I had to let you go on your way.”

“And this? This is for keeps? For ever?”

“Really, I don't know, Sir. But we fell out of one world, didn't we? It's perfectly feasible we could do it again,...”

“You mean you're not sure?”

She shrugged. “I don't need to be sure about anything. This is my natural environment after all. I know you need more certainty, because that's your mortal nature, but would you want to risk slipping through to another reality? I mean, how strange do want things to get?”

“What about going back? Back to something surer, something less ambiguous and dream-like?”

“It seems to me we skipped out of that world just in time, Sir. Why would you want to go back to that? My honest opinion? You should plan on sticking around until things start making sense to you. No,...

don't look at me like that,... things *will* make sense, eventually. I promise."

By now, Anton had moved into the periphery of my vision. He was perhaps wondering what was taking us so long. She saw him too and straightened her face, her eyes sparkling with a false brightness. "Are you sure I can't get you anything, sir?"

I was frustrated by the interruption. I needed more time with her. I needed to know everything she knew, and why she was here, my only conscious guide, the only one who knew where I'd come from.

"I'll take brandy and a cigar in my room," I said. "And Bernadette?"

"Sir?"

"Be sure to bring it yourself. We need to talk somewhere we'll not be disturbed."

She made a note on her pad, and as she did so she replied in a conspiratorial whisper. "If you can wait an hour, I'll be off duty then, and won't be missed until morning."

Chapter 46

I was idly contemplating the star-field screen-saver of my laptop. I'd switched the machine on, slotted the memory stick in and poked around the folders, opening files at random, each one revealing a dull splat of words that must have been important to me once but I felt no connection with them any more. I remembered writing them, but apart from that they might as well have been the incoherent ramblings of a stranger.

There were the beginnings of several novels, all of which had fizzled out after two chapters, there were files containing only a few lines of dialogue, others containing the abandoned corpses of blog entries that had never seen the light of day, also musings on the nature of existence that now seemed laughably childish. I'd stared at the machine feeling a mixture of disgust and anguish, and then the screen saver cut in, mercifully covering my inadequacy with a veil of pretend star-travel.

When the knock came, I called for Bernadette to enter. Then I told her to set the brandy to one side, and to keep the cigar because I'd apparently lost my taste for them. Then I told her to make sure the door was locked, and to lift her skirt so I could see the soft flesh on the insides of her thighs. I paused when I said this, wondering which part of me had been responsible, and wondering if I might re-write that part of my story because it seemed a little out of character.

Understandably Bernadette hesitated, her eyes widening in surprise. “Sir?”

“It's not what you think,” I added, hastily. “I'm not going to touch you.” No, I thought. I'm not going to touch her – that's not what this is about, thank God!. “It might just clarify things a little if,... I could be sure you are who you appear to be. Would you mind? Please?”

She understood, I think, and lifted her skirt, then ran her fingers over the ladder marks, strumming them like the strings of a guitar. “Is this what you wanted to see?”

I nodded.

“Would you like me to undress for you, then you can see the other marks?”

She was playing with me now.

“There are no other marks, Bernadette. I've seen the whole of you and you're without any other blemish. Only those. And they're old marks.”

“Yes.” She lowered her skirt and smoothed it. “But what does it prove?”

“It proves that you know me, from that other time. That you were *there*, that you really came through with me, into this ,... whatever *this* is,... this *version* of events.”

She shook her head. “No. You could still be making me up. You saw the marks there before, so you might have re-created them here. It's that simple. I told you before, everything you see about you is exactly the way you want it, whether you know it or not.” She smiled. “Anyway,” she went on.”Let's not dwell on that for now.” She smiled and gave me a cheeky twinkle. “I've shown you mine, now you must show me yours.”

“Show you what? My Scars?” I pulled the memory stick from the lap-top and tossed it to her. “On there,” I said.

She caught it, then tossed it back. “I know these are hurtful to you,” she said. “But they're easily healed. Just delete them, and start again.”

“I did lose them once,” I mused. “The experience taught me that what we sometimes think is important, isn't really worth anything at all, that sometimes what we're clinging to is just the rubbish of the past, and haven't the sense to let it go before we drown in it.

“And in letting go, I gained something, something extraordinary. I,... I was growing used to that feeling, but then things took me in a different direction. They took me from a world that had lost all stability, but where I was apparently still sane, and they've delivered me into a world that appears stable, but where I'm behaving as if I've lost my mind.”

“I told you,” she said, her tone challenging. “It's easily mended. Delete those old stories, and instead write down the story you thought you'd lost. Recover the part of yourself you were growing to like so much.

And maybe Gabrielle will recognise you again."

The first bit was easy, and I didn't hesitate. I popped the memory stick into the slot, brought up the window and highlighted all the folders. Then I hit delete and watched the timer counting down as once more my past dissolved before my eyes. It didn't matter. None of this was real. I'd lost them all before, and got them back. The same could happen again.

"There," I said. "All gone. It's of no account, anyway. They were rubbish. But the story I left behind? That,... that was *something.* But it's truly gone. I can never get that back, which means Gabrielle can never know me like she once did. How can she remember something that never existed?"

"How do you know it's gone?"

"It was in the journal Gabrielle gave me. Nothing else would make sense. The touch, the look, the feel of that book – even the scent of it, and the circumstances under which it was given to me. And then there are all the moments I've spent writing in it. It all adds up. And it's gone now. Like Gabrielle. Lost."

"The journal?" she asked, then she calmly pulled open a drawer, took out a book and held it up."You mean this one, Sir?"

I was astonished. It was *the* journal! And for just a moment I was elated by it's apparently miraculous recovery, but then I grew suspicious of it. "You,... you took that book from Gabrielle's room!"

"Nonsense, Sir," she smiled cheekily. "It was here all the time. See for yourself."

So I took it, savoured the texture of its cover by turning it over and over in my hands, and then I opened it to look inside. It still bore Gabrielle's name on the first page. She'd made no attempt to rub it out. And the rest of the book?...

It was blank!

I looked at Bernadette and she read my mind. "Did you think I could re-create that story for you? Word for word? You're the writer, Sir. The contents are between you and your muse. You must ask *her* for it."

I sighed, trying to suppress the frustration in my breast, a frustration which I knew was useless, but which I found myself struggling with all the same. “Gabrielle was my muse,” I said. “Perhaps we should ask *her* for it? Though I doubt she'll have the slightest idea what I'm talking about.”

Bernadette also sighed by way of parody. “You *project* your muse, sir. You muse is daemonic. Your muse is no more Gabrielle, than it is me.”

I closed the book, raised it to my nose and savoured the scent of it. And yes,.. all right, it was Gabrielle's, but like the book, the promise of her was empty now. I offered it back. “Please,... you must return this to her room, before she realises it's missing.”

Bernadette ignored it. Instead she looked away and contemplated the cigar. Then she produced a lighter from her waistcoat pocket and lit it, took a speculative drag,... seemed pleased by it, and went out onto the balcony. As she went she cast me a backward glance that I took to mean she wished me to follow, so I followed.

I dropped the journal onto the table by the balcony rail, the table at which I'd penned so many words by moonlight now, words that had vanished, their loss, like the reality of my earlier story, to be something long lamented. I looked down at the cover of the book once more under the moonlight. It's richly entwined patterns seemed animated, their colours shifting, their forms morphing gently to the rhythm of a thing unseen, a thing unheard. I could feel it in my heart, beneath my feet, a deep thrumming, vibrating up from the depths of the earth. It was no use though; what I'd written with the urgent enthusiasm of these past weeks would take me years to claw back in even their roughest form. And they would inevitably lack the vitality and the presence of that lost version of reality.

Bernadette was staring out into the night, the stars impossibly vivid, like crystal encrustations, the lake a plane of silver now, streaked with waving veils of midnight. She took a long pull on the cigar and blew out a column of sweetly aromatic smoke. “Are we making this up, do you think?” she asked.

The night was cool and she shivered, so I draped my jacket protectively over her shoulders. She hugged it and thanked me with a smile.

“Making it up?” I mused. “If only I could believe I was capable of so

perfect an expression of the divine."

She laughed and looked tenderly at me. "Have you noticed anything else that's different here?"

"Just small details," I said. "The garden and that pretty little jetty by the lake. Also, this isn't my original room. My room at this point in the story last time looked out over the back of the hotel. I couldn't afford this one, and I only upgraded after the emergency, when Gruber had abandoned his room rates, and all the richer guests had evacuated on the first helicopter."

"So what does that tell you?"

"That I've not simply gone back in time? This feels like a much later version of my story, a different revision, you know? I mean,... all right, I realise it's moved back several days, to a point in time before Gabrielle and I became lovers,... but it's also late season, autumn coming. You can feel it. Soon the snows will come and the season will end here. La Maison will close its doors."

"Then this version does not entirely abandon what went before. It builds upon it,... takes it forward. Your story is evolving."

"Evolving? Yes, all re-drafts are like that. They each create another reality, slightly different to the one before, each possessed of its own strangeness, each groping towards something, but always building on the previous version."

"Then you wouldn't really want to go back to your earlier draft, Sir. It would feel incomplete, empty,... like abandoning your latest insights for an earlier imperfect grasp of reality."

I shrugged, but she had a point. Whatever this was it *was* my story, and to go back to the way things were before would be like,... getting so far in a tale and then losing half of it, corrupting the file or dropping the memory stick down a crack in the floorboards. I just didn't want this future, calm and stable though it seemed, unless I could also possess what I'd had in the past. Unless I could have Gabrielle.

"All I know is," I said. "I seem to be a little better off here – financially at least. Perhaps my Inspector Grantley was more successful. Perhaps he went global, with a Hollywood studio buying up the rights." I

laughed at the thought, but she did not respond, and through the seriousness of her gaze, I wondered if it might be true – or even by saying I might be *making* it true.

“But these are just the visible things,” she said. “You must also look for the strangeness in the gaps. Things seem normal here, and circumstances tempt you back into trusting your rational senses, but you have to let them go before this place will start making sense to you.”

“Let go?”

“Yes. Stop believing in it.”

“I thought believing in it was the whole point – that I was supposed to accept it as my reality now.”

“No. Only when you stop believing in it will it become real.”

“That's nonsense. It sounds like Zen aphorism.”

“You're not so far from the truth there, sir. Reject the literal. Reject what you see as being only literally true. Accept that things are impossible to define in a purely rational sense any more. Here, all the labels have fallen off. Things carry many meanings. Think of your reader, at this moment.”

“My reader?”

“The person reading this story now. Do they struggle with the literal definition of what it is they think I am? Do they persevere in putting me into that neatly labelled box? *What is she*, they're wondering? Is she a waitress? Daemon? Pixie? Or do they let it go and accept my sudden ambiguity? Do they come to accept that no sooner have they fastened upon one definition for me, I am already becoming something else?”

The lake sparkled now as it was stroked by a cold breeze, a breeze that spoke of autumn tints and coming rains. I heard the cry of owls in the forest, bats came out and flew in ragged circles around the lawn, and the night took on a numinous air. When I looked at Bernadette, her pale face seemed aglow, like a Pierott mask in the spotlight. It was haunting. There was even a mole upon her cheek that I was sure had not been there before. It looked like a small tear. Pierrot? Where had

that image come from? The sad but hopeful ingénue, Pierrot? Was that Bernadette? Or was it myself I saw reflected in her?

“Bernadette,... those marks on your legs,...”

“Each one a story, Sir. A story no one wanted to hear, a story I could not have found the words to tell out loud.”

“But they're old stories, like on my memory stick. When did they become old stories for you?”

“Like yours, Sir - the day I arrived at La Maison.”

She pulled a chair up to the balcony and sat down, hitching up her skirt as she did so, and showing me the marks again. “They fascinate you, don't they?” she said.

It was true. My eyes were drawn to them now, and even though I could also see the black laced vee of her panties, it was the marks, pale silver in the moonlight against white skin, that held me captive, the marks that aroused something in me, something strange, something dangerous,... and irresistible.

“Would you like to touch them, Sir?”

“No,... better not.”

“It's all right. You can touch them. They might surprise you. Go ahead. Kneel beside me. Close your eyes and touch them.”

So I knelt, while she sat, reclining now, her legs wide, one foot upon the balcony rail. Then I closed my eyes and I touched the lines, felt for them against the softness of her thigh, though taking care to imagine my fingertips a good skirt's length from her waist and I fancied I could read them like a blind man with a Braille book. She'd told me herself each line was a story, and I knew at once then,...

These stories were my own!

“You see?” she said.

The lines were like brief statements of despair, barely a finger's width away from each other, so easy to slip from one to its neighbour. And

with each reading I felt the desperation in my words increase, but felt also the evolution of my thoughts, so I knew I had been coming to this for a long time, inching my way, line by line, revision by revision to La Maison Du Lac, to *this* story,... to the one story that had ever meant anything to me.

She did not flinch as my fingers climbed the ladder, and as I climbed I realised I was approaching a version of my story I'd forbidden myself to write. She knew what I was thinking by my hesitation, but coaxed me on. I felt her hand upon my back, drawing me gently closer. “You'll find everything you desire if you only have the courage, Sir.”

“Bernadette, *I can't. I can't do,.... that*.”

“But have you not thought, the one place you might find your story again is the one place you are clearly so afraid to go?”

I opened my eyes and tried to draw away but she caught my hand and held me there, somehow preventing me from rising. The air was beginning to carry with it the musk of sex,... possibly imagined, and imagined also perhaps was the darkening patch on the vee of her pants, betraying what? Her arousal? Her yearning to guide me, and to take me further?

“Anton,... and Herr Gruber,” I pleaded. “They'll be wondering where you are.”

“My shift is finished, sir. Remember? I told you. I won't be missed until morning.” She took a long draw on the cigar, then let out the smoke with an expansive sigh. “You're right, you know?” she said. “I am crowned Herr Gruber's princess. I can show you things he cannot. At La Maison du Lac, I am entrusted with the keys to places even he cannot unlock.”

She drew deeply once more on the cigar and lay back more comfortably, her legs widening, her hand drawing my hand and inviting my fingers to read more. Then she slid her panties aside, and I was overwhelmed by her scent. It was an unambiguous invitation. “I dare you,” she said. “Explore the one place you are afraid to go.”

There was something in her voice that drove me,... a tenderness, a sympathy, a sweet, sweet longing,... And, *God forgive me*, I could not resist.

She dissolved at the first touch, became a moist pool into which my fingers sank helplessly. And she said it was all right. She said it was not weakness. She said I had not betrayed Gabrielle. She said I had already rescued her. She curled her arms around my neck and I caught a glimpse of the Cartier glittering as she drew me to her bosom. I heard it ticking as she held me, and I felt myself held safe within the syncopated rhythms of that ticking, and the beating of her heart....

Chapter 47

Midnight. The pavilion. A warm breeze ruffled the lake into ribbons of silver and sent the awnings swinging and buffeting, grey and ghost like against the terracotta pillars. Out in the blackness of imagination lay the island, and the annexe, and an insignificant wooden jetty guarded by a three headed dog called Cerberus.

The Kayak was down on the shingle shore, but of the cowled ferryman Charon, or Gunther, there was no sign. I would have to ferry myself then, which was as well for surely he would have tried to drown me on the way, and I could not be sure if this was my mortal self undertaking the journey, or a dreamier splintered part of me. Or it might have been better to simply drown, and take a risk on waking up snug once more beside Gabrielle,...

But what if it led only to oblivion? To the end of my being? Was that even possible? My experience of these past days was telling me the mind was indestructible. Knock it out of one reality, and it would simply pop up in another. Was this the eternal life the mystics told us about? But what sort of life was it if it was to be lived entirely inside one's own imagination? But then again was that any different, really, to the life I had once known?

It should have been an awful realisation, feeling that void of my own eternity yawning before me,... it's meaninglessness weighing even more heavily than thoughts of a life lived in the usual and possibly more appropriately futile fashion of a man's three score and ten. But something was telling me both were the same, and the thing that resolved the paradox was simply one's understanding of the nature of time. I could no more be obliterated than the universe could wink out of existence. Consciousness was like energy and obeyed the laws of conservation; it could neither be created nor destroyed, but simply converted from one form into another. I could explore worlds, embodied as I was in a skin that was recognisably my own, even as I slept, so why not while my corpse rotted away? And the only thing that kept me sane in all of this was the constant, sobering voice of my ego, telling me,... I was probably wrong. But if I was wrong, then what was this place?

A lamp burned upon the altar table, its base an elegant twist of glass

through which I could make out sufficient kerosene to last until dawn – enough to guide me back, I thought. I moved the lamp to the balustrade, where I'd moved it once before, that fateful night when Gabrielle and I had l swum here, and we'd felt the need for a reference in the darkness, as I felt it now.

It was the same lake, the same pavilion, but a different time, a different life, and I was conscious of inviting the exchange of symbols between that life and this. What else could I do but hope something would leak across from that previous time, like Gruber's missing watch, and guide me either backwards or forwards to my fate? Either way, I prayed I would be shown a path that would crystallise this fog of semi-being into something more reassuringly firm.

I did not actually need the lamp. I'd acquired a detailed walking map from Lagrange. I also had a global positioning device, which gave my location to within a few meters, and it's computer chip had yet to be fried by the solar wind, which may or may not happen at any moment. The map showed the island clearly, showed also a collection of buildings which I took to be the annex, and a lone wooden jetty with a pecked line for a path connecting the twain.

La Maison was similarly detailed, the pavilion a dot marked in antiquated font. I set the coordinates of both my start point and my destination into the device, so I could not miss; it was merely a question of following the flashing dot on the screen. Except,... I was dealing with five dimensions here – the left and right, and up and downness of space, the backwards and forwardness of time, as well as the infinite nesting of every possible outcome I could conceive of, without which the other four dimensions collapsed into a singularity of infinite meaninglessness.

The Kayak was not the same as in the previous version of my story. It was older, built of wood and gleamed in the moonlight as if it had been polished. It slid out onto the water with a reassuring sturdiness. I stepped in and with what I hoped would be my last glance at this revision of La Maison, I pushed myself off, then headed for the Isle of Hades, for surely I had no choice now but to think of it that way. And my mission? It was to find my one true love there, and bring her safely back.

Though I did not need the lamp, I would rely upon it, I thought, at least to guide my return, because I knew it was the most symbolic thing, more symbolic than the GPS computer chip in my pocket, and that in

the darkness it might have me stepping back ashore at any point in the where-ness and when-ness of things. This didn't worry me, so long as I was carried into that more viable reality, a viable version of my story, and more crucially, of course, one in which Gabrielle knew me as the man who loved her.

I'd crossed a little over half way when I realised there was a light burning on the island too, down by the water-line. I'd not expected this. Had Charon paddled over and set the lamp to guide me? Such solicitude seemed unlikely, or perhaps I'd misjudged the man. I paused and looked back. The lamp still burned at the pavilion. It made no difference if I went forwards or back now, because my story had already lost its literal coherence, and was following a trail of symbols as I slid across the surface of the lake. I was not *literally* expecting to find Gabrielle at the annex. The important thing was how I found her when I returned to the mainland reality. I was curious, though, and not fearful, so I chose to go on.

The lamp burned on the jetty, casting a steady orange glow that welcomed my arrival. The lamp was striking in that it was of an identical design to the one at the pavilion. This suggested a significance, even to the calculating mind of my Inspector Grantley. There were no other boats, by which Grantley deduced I was alone – but I suspected such logic was a rather flimsy thing to go on under the circumstances.

A trail of solar powered lamps snaked off into the forest, marking the line of the path. They were too feeble to be seen at a distance, their dim pale blue glow sufficient only to guide one's steps close at hand. Pale blue, I thought; safe colours? Cautiously, I followed them, braced for Cerberus to leap out at any second, from the unfriendly shades. In self defence, I closed my eyes, took a breath and pushed Cerberus gently into the background of my thoughts. I felt my heartbeat settle, my breaths become less ragged, and all the barbed hooks of my irrational fears slide away, so I was able to carry on, unafraid once more. It wasn't like me - this level of self control. Someone, or *something* was looking after me. And that someone was close.

The annex eventually came into view, breaking upon my senses with all the eerie impact of my first visit, though in a different way now. Each of the four apartments was picked out by concealed lighting and the pool, which lay in their centre, was illumined by submerged lamps, powerful enough to transform it into a plane of liquid light. The rippling of the water lent a queer animated feel to the shadows that it cast upon

the façades of the apartments, and upon the encroaching forest. It was almost welcoming, but only because it had hidden the clinical lines, absorbing everything into the soft sponge of semi-consciousness.

I made for the apartment I'd last occupied with Gabrielle. That had been an eternity ago - quite literally. - and in the same breath, the apartment we had vacated only this morning. Testing the door, I found it open and ventured inside. It was the same as before, a vast open space, open plan décor, somewhat clinical but disguised now by the more intimate lighting so as to be almost alluring. I went upstairs, and checked the bedroom, more in hope than expectation, but the bed was unoccupied and crisply made. I moved along the landing to the balcony, sensing with each footfall a misty déjà vous, and then, looking down upon the pool, I saw something, a shadow moving – hard to tell - but then my heart leaped and I felt a mixture of revulsion and delight when a figure emerged from the water and lay upon the lounger.

It was Gabrielle! Or rather, I dared only to believe it was my thoughts of Gabrielle projected into this malleable version of reality, into an eerie kind of flesh. These were strange times, a strange transitional phase of being, and the lesson of Bernadette was that I could take nothing at face value.

Gabrielle looked as I'd seen her once before - the writing on her body fading as the words were washed off by sweat and swimming. I wondered if this was my crossing point, a moment of fleeting coherence where I might slip deftly back to that earlier drafting, back to the Gabrielle who knew me as the man who loved her.

We'd been marooned here for days and were readying ourselves for flight. I'd gone downstairs, and written the words afresh upon her skin while she'd dictated them to me from the book - the now lost book. There'd been such an atmosphere that night, something charged and poignant, as if I'd already been anticipating its loss. Were such feelings the hazy memories of other times, other possibilities?

I didn't hurry in descending the stairs. I was thinking I would give the apparition ample opportunity to vanish if it chose because I wanted nothing to do with an insubstantial shade. I'd not come this far to deal with smoke, and reasoned that only the thought-form of a purposeful intent would linger long enough to out-wait my deliberate dithering.

When at last I came down she was still there, only now she'd dressed in a magnificent gown, like a movie star on awards' night. I recognised

it as one of the many gowns Gabrielle and I had found in that other apartment, an ivory satin sheath that left nothing of her shape to the imagination - even though I knew in reality – reality being the subjective term here – that her form owed *everything* to my imagination.

Though she'd been swimming just a moment ago, her hair was already dry and brushed, flowing and glowing in voluminous waves. She sat upright, her feet tucked daintily to one side, an expression of patient expectation. She was waiting, waiting for me, and against her bosom, tucked behind her folded arms was the book. The journal!

“I know I'm making you up,” I warned her. “I know you're a phantasm. I know you're not really Gabrielle. I know you can't tell me anything I don't already know.”

She arched one brow, and eyed me playfully. “Is that so, darling? Then it seems you already know an awful lot!” She tapped the book with her index finger. “So, tell me, do you also know what this is?”

I was puzzled. Her voice. It had Gabrielle's tone, certainly - I felt the richness of it, the sensuous sonority sending waves of an almost sexual energy vibrating through me - but the Gabrielle I knew spoke English with a beautiful French accent, while here she spoke English with cool, authoritative, cut-glass precision, like a débutante fresh from a 1950's finishing school. It was eerie. Was she putting it on? If she was, it was very good.

I watched her in wonder while she opened the book and flicked through the pages. “Seventy seven,” she announced. “Third paragraph. What does it say?”

I was at a loss. I could see the journal was no longer blank; it was filled with writing. My writing? I felt a shadow moving over me, a harbinger of doubt and I thought back, suddenly realising I was unable to recall actually leaving my rooms, leaving Bernadette. It was as if my consciousness had emerged into full awareness already half way along the path to the pavilion, just as I'd been unable to recall the details of,.. what Bernadette and I had done,...

What had we done? Come on! Think man. Her skirt,... she'd smoked a cigar,... I'd, touched her, slid my fingers,... What? You bloody fool, what were you thinking? So, while you're dreaming this you're actually lying comatose, your head on Bernadette's breast,...

She was ahead of me. “Ah,... you think you're dreaming, sleepy head? Well, I'll grant you, it's an easy mistake to make. But if you're dreaming you'll know the words that are written here. Or you can make them up and they'll be the same. The dream will make them true for us. So, come along, darling. What are they?”

“Page seventy seven?... third paragraph?” I'd no idea, nor could I invent words to suit.

She shook her head, a disappointed teacher. “Let me remind you,” she sighed, then began to read:

She was wearing ivory silk pyjamas and bedroom slippers, and she held a thick book to her bosom, its cover decorated in rich paisley patterns. Silently, nymph like, she came, then sat beside me in the chair Gruber had only recently vacated. She crossed her legs and leaned back, breathing deeply of the air. “How strange it is,” she said.

“Yes, yes. I know those words.” I felt a shiver at the exquisite memory of that night, at the look, and the softness and the imagined silken feel of Gabrielle. Had Bernadette felt that way as I'd touched her? Why could I not remember. What else had we done?... you idiot!

“Guilty conscience, darling? Never mind that now. What else have you written here?”

I hung my head, ashamed. “I can't remember.”

“Of course you can remember. You can remember it *all*, if you could only be bothered to try.”

Just then my eye was caught by something. “You're wearing the Cartier,” I said.

She looked. “I am? What of it?”

“Gabrielle wears a Rolex. If I was making you up then, surely, I would have had you wear the Rolex. The Cartier is Bernadette's symbol. So you grew out of my association with her. And then there's your accent,... something about your accent. I know that voice,... I'm sure I know it!”

She glanced down at the watch and shook her head. “You're right

about the watch. That was careless of me." The Cartier morphed at once into Gabrielle's Rolex, and I was glad of it because my rational senses finally rejected it and gave me no other choice but to accept that I *was* dreaming. This was in spite of her assurances to the contrary, but of course I was able to counter-reassure myself that such is always the way with dreams.

She looked at me then in all innocence. "But you were saying something about my accent?"

"Yes. I don't know anyone who talks that way. No one talks that way now, least of all English girls."

"Oh, that. It's for the *American* market, darling. I'm an actress, you see? I've been practising so hard. It's the way they *expect* all well bred English girls to speak – even as you say, they actually don't. You're right of course – it's terribly out of date now, though actually, you know, I find I rather like it."

"But you're *not* English. You're French."

"Good point. Well done,... yes,..." Then she lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "But in case you haven't worked it out yet, I'm only *pretending*." She watched me, then cracked a grin. "I'm sorry. This is all terribly confusing for you, isn't it?"

"You're pretending to be what? English, or to be Gabrielle?"

"Well,... *both* darling, obviously."

"Then,... who are you? I mean *really."*

She looked inwardly for the answer. "I'm not sure I am a *who*, darling. Not exactly."

"Then what?"

She shrugged, as if it were perfectly obvious. "I'm what drives you, I'm what guides you. When you look at a woman, *any woman*, it's me that you see. When you're with a woman yet find yourself looking at another, it is me who has led you astray. Yes,... sorry about that."

This was too much. "You can't be."

“I'm afraid so. I'm what you project. I'm your inborn, instinctive knowledge of womankind. Your anima. Your soul. Your muse. I have no form, other than what I choose to project. I'm not mortal you see?” She flicked back to the opening of my story and began to read. “*When a man is first attracted to a woman, it's not really the woman who draws him, more the recognition of something undiscovered within himself.”* She gave me a twinkle. “Remember that? Well, here I am. You've discovered me in my dwelling place, at the very centre of *your* self.” She gave a faint bow. “Well,... I am it, the one and only, the original. At your service, Richard.” Then she held out the journal. “So,... do you want this bloody thing or not? Only we've been working on it together for years and years now and it would be a shame to lose it.”

In a daze, I reached out for the book. “Years, you say?”

“Of course, darling. All those old stories. You shouldn't be so dismissive of them, you know? They were each in their own way leading us to this, like stepping stones.”

She gestured to the spot beside her on the lounger, and her smile seemed filled with such a maternal warmth I was sufficiently moved to want to sit beside her, to bask in her glow, and her timeless familiarity. And as I sat with her, wondering about the meaning of her, and about her coming, I remembered my fingertips brushing against the lightly puckered flesh of Bernadette's scars. *“Each one a story, sir,”* she'd said.

I began to flick through the pages of the journal, recognising the words as my own. It was definitely the journal, *my journal* – or at least the dream, the hallucination, or whatever this was, was convincing me of the truth of it. If only I could keep hold of the memory of these words, I thought! But it was hopeless; they'd be gone within moments of my waking. Gone, in the way of all dreams.

Waking,...

Into Bernadette's embrace.

Or would I?

Just when exactly had I fallen asleep and begun to dream? Oh,... please let it be before I'd told Bernadette to lift her skirt! Please let me

erase that stupidity. Let me strike it from the record at the next revision!I loved that girl dearly, like no other, and I did not want her tarnished.

I felt sick now, sick at last at the thought of what I'd done, what I *might* have done, as if only now I was sober enough to understand it. But whatever I might or might not have done, the metaphor, the *symbol* was the same and seemed to yield a similar meaning, a similar message: “I would have betrayed her, wouldn't I?” I said. “Gabrielle predicted it. She said I would.”

“Gabrielle?” She ran her fingers through the pages of the book as it lay in my lap, flicking back and forth until she found the right passage. “If you read here,... let me see,... around here somewhere, I think you'll find she says you'll grow cold, that you'll tire of her.”

“Exactly! And *then* I'll betray her.” I dropped my head into my hands. “I *have* betrayed her. Betrayed her for a girl half my age. What the hell was I thinking? What the hell happened? What the hell did I do! Poor Bernadette! But she led me on. No,... no, that's no excuse. There was something,... an atmosphere. And I *wanted* it. I wanted *her*.”

She laid her head against my shoulder and in spite of the bitter acid of a bizarrely delayed remorse, I was at once transported to those divine regions, all too fleeting, where everything makes sense, where everything is dissolved into an intense loving grace, and moreover: where everything is forgiven.

“You Romantics are all the same,” she said. She curled an arm around my shoulders and hugged me to her. “Only the wiser ones understand what it is they're looking at when they see a pretty face.”

“I would have lost her! I would have lost Gabrielle.”

“You might have done, had you not realised in time.”

“Realised?”

“Yes, darling,... had you not realised what's important in all of this is that you understand the difference between human and divine love.”

“And,... do I understand the difference?”

“Of course you do. And besides, in case there's any doubt, I'm here to explain it to to you. Again. And it's really very easy. You cannot project divine love onto mortal flesh, darling. Not even onto one so divinely lovely as Gabrielle. You simply can't do it.”

Her arm felt warm and steady as she rocked me. This woman, this spirit, had been everything to me, always: mother, sister, lover, all my knowledge, all my stirrings, all my longings, from the most innocent to the most lustful, had been born in her.

“Yes,... yes,...” I said. “I see it,... I see it. But it's no use telling me all of this now. I *need* meaning – even it's only the illusion of meaning. And for the first time in my life I found it in a woman, a mortal woman. So it's no use telling me the only kind of love worth anything is the love I feel,... for you.”

“But I didn't say that, darling. Not at all. Your place, your purpose, your mortal *meaning*,... as you so eloquently put it, they're with Gabrielle. After all, who do you think it was who led you to her in the first place? No,... you must win her back. You must make her remember you. But even as she remembers, you must not forget, the deepest tides within you are ruled by my own rhythms. Only then can you be assured of keeping her.

“Now,... listen, you must forget all this nonsense about bringing your lover back from Hades. It's very clever, but it's too *literal*, darling. What you'll be bringing back from here is the essential truth of *who* and *what* I am. If you're serious about rescuing your mortal lover, then you need to have it clear in your mind: your muse lives half in daylight, half in dark, but remember, both are equally *vital*.”

“But I've already lost her. I mean the daylight part. She's lost to darkness.”

“No,... we'll get her back. You'll both see the light again.“

“But how can I face her, when I know a part of me,...”

“What,... betrayed her? For whom? For Bernadette? But that was *me*, silly. Weren't you listening? It was *me* you saw when you looked at her.”

“It wasn't you,.... I just,... just,.. .”

“Oh,... that,... don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't be so cruel.”

“It's too late. It's done.”

“No,... what you did was simply a possibility. And we're just exploring possibilities here. I mean it's also possible you *didn't* summon her to your room at all, that you were sitting there, idly contemplating the screen saver of your laptop when she came, unbidden, knocking on your door.”

“But why would she do that?”

“Because her heart was troubled, darling. Because she was in need of a sympathetic ear, the ear of someone with whom she feels a rare sense of connection. And,... though it was a little unusual perhaps, the two of you then sat out on the balcony, under the stars, and she told you of her troubles,... and you listened,... because you're such a good listener. And she projects her own soul onto you. And then she went a away feeling a little lighter in herself. But sexually *intact*.” She looked at me closely. “Is that not also a possibility?”

I allowed myself a flutter of hope. “I'm beginning to think anything might possible.”

“And you could be right.” She tapped the cover of the book. Then, lowering her voice for emphasis, she said: “Bring things up to date. Find the connections between this story and the one that follows, so that it becomes *one* story. But don't do this if all you seek is a way back to that earlier time, because there isn't one. Find the connections, then we can move forward. And remember, at the moment, individual events are no longer significant in themselves. Nor are things ever what they appear to be.”

I was still looking at the book, trying to listen to her words, while simultaneously trying to hold on to the words I'd written, because surely the book would never make it to the mainland, to the surface of my consciousness. It would become a stone or a twig in my hands. It was, after all, only a trick of my mind that maintained the illusion of its bookness now.

She held out her hand for me and I took it. It felt soft and warm, and she squeezed gently, tenderly. “Gabrielle *knows* you love her,” she said. “You were right, though you didn't believe it yourself: it crosses all

realities. And across all realities, she is always just a heartbeat from loving you. That is what you are, the two of you, what you gift to the pullulating ground of human experience." She smiled. "It's so unimaginably vast, I know you feel lost in it, but to feel lost is to be human. Still, your thoughts *do* make a difference. You *can* change things. You *can* have an effect. First of all though you need to have a very clear view of who and what you truly are – also what *I* am. You must understand me Richard or I can easily destroy you. And if that happens, you will destroy her."

"But,.."

"Shush. *Imagine*,... you're on a beach,... let's do it,... let's go to Ibiza! We close our eyes and imagine ourselves there. Gabrielle is beside you, she's wearing a yellow Bikini. You're both stretched out on loungers, beneath a parasol. She's so beautiful,.... but tired, dozing after your long journey from La Maison. You look up, you see a woman,.... tall, voluptuous, dark, her lips gashed red with lipstick. She casts you a meaningful look. Do you see her, darling?"

"Yes."

"You feel such an unexpected stirring at the sight of her. What does this mean? Who is she? Well,... *who is she darling*?"

"What? I,... I don't know,..."

"Yes you do. *Who is she?*"

"Oh,... wait,.. I get it. It's you! It's you, of course."

"Yes. It' me. Now you know me. But what am I up to? Do I do this to tease you? Do I do this to lead you astray?"

"No,... you're trying to get my attention."

"But why? What is it darling? What do I want from you? Why do I keep pestering you?"

"I'm,... neglecting you."

"Hardly,... there are men who go their whole lives without thinking of me. You think of me all the time. No,... it's because I'm fucking *angry*

with you, darling. I want to get your attention then we can argue,... and you know we always feel much better when we've had a good argument."

"Argument?"

"You know what I mean." She gave my hand a squeeze. "Now, open your eyes." She made a show of consulting her watch. "It's time, I'm afraid."

"Time?"

"Figuratively speaking of course. Time is rather a malleable concept here. But, *time*, yes,... time I dusted you down and sent you back." She laughed, then rose from the lounger and offered me her hand once more. "Come along. You've rather a lot of work to do before morning, I'm afraid."

She walked with me then, back to the jetty, every inch the movie star and her million dollar grace had me feeling impossibly rich beside her. I was now surely at the very centre of my universe, and at the centre of my self was this woman, this divine ideal, I suppose. And if I was truly dreaming all of this, I now had the sense of a coming wakefulness, and found I wanted to hold it all back,... to resist,... for surely I had never known anything so extraordinary as this? I was dreaming. But I had never felt so,... alive!

Coming down to the lake, we gazed for a moment across the black waters, listening to its viscous lapping upon the shingle shore. I could see the speck of lantern-light that marked the pavilion, and my return. It seemed to beckon, but I didn't feel ready.

She sensed my hesitation. "You're afraid to cross over?" she asked.

"Reluctant," I said. "Reluctant to let go of this feeling. And uncertain,... uncertain how the world will be when I get back to it. I always seem to be running to catch up, to find my place in it."

"You'll be all right."

"And will I,... ever see you again? I mean in the flesh, like this?"

"You mean over there?" She nodded. "All of this was unexpected,

Richard. I didn't pull you out of that boat, pull you out of your old life, and away from Gabrielle. I'm reacting to things as much as you in that respect. I mean, I've long suspected the unreal world was about to overwhelm the real,... you've felt it too,.. many people have. But now, since we're here, and, looking on the bright side, it means we're never that far away from one another, and I can help you in ways I couldn't before."

"Help me?"

"We must get her back, Richard."

"Gabrielle?"

"Yes."

"You'll help me?"

"I promise."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"What's it to you?"

"Everything darling. I led you to her, remember? You love her because I love her too. You can't bear to think of losing her, because losing her would be unthinkable to me too."

"How will I know you?"

She smiled. "Don't be silly darling. No matter who I am, you'll always know me, now."

I turned to her then, and felt myself gripped with a mad swirl of emotion; love, gratitude,... astonishment. I had the journal in my hands, clamped tightly, afraid to let go of it, yet knowing full well I could really not take it with me. And there was something else,...

"What? What is it, darling?"

"I'm not sure I dare ask,... I mean,... if it would be considered rude, or

improper or something,... given that you are everything to me."

"Just ask, and if it's at all in my power,...."

"*Pourriez vous être,... Gabrielle,... pour moi?*"

She nodded as if she'd expected this. "You want me to be Gabrielle for you? You want me to remind you? Of course. My pleasure." She took a breath then dropped the English accent, delved more deeply into her throat for the Gallic syllables. "All right," she said. "*Donc,... embrasse-moi, idiot*." Then she opened her arms and drew me into Gabrielle's embrace. And she *was* Gabrielle. And I rocked her gratefully, murmuring her name.

And Gabrielle said: "Don't give up on me, Richard. I'm waiting for you." Then she told me to have faith in my purpose. But what was *that*, I asked her. What was my purpose in all of this!

Yours is to try to rescue me, she said. *And mine is to finally allow you to succeed.*

Chapter 48

I woke with the sun on the balcony of my rooms. My head was resting in my arms as I lay slumped across the table, a blanket around my shoulders, and as I took a firm hold of myself once more, I drew a shuddering breath,... drew fresh mountain air into my lungs and coughed in surprise at the taste of it. Before me lay the journal, open about half way. Surrounding it was a profusion of La Maison pencils, each worn to a nub. Wood scented shavings covered the rest of the table, spilling onto my lap, and the floor. I had no memory of taking my leave from the annex.

“Good morning, Sir.”

It was Bernadette, all starched and proper, her smile a polite greeting, and bearing not a hint of what we'd done. She'd brought tea on a tray, and set it down at my elbow.

“Have you been working all night?” she asked.

There was still a pencil clamped between my forefinger and thumb. They were stiff, indeed they were rigid and numb and I had to force them open with my other hand in order to let go. Nor could I lift my arm, so I pulled it like a wounded man into my lap, then sat back and stared at her. I was thinking that I knew her, that I knew this girl *intimately*, yet I could barely remember the facts of it. The scars! I'd touched her scars, then ridden the softness of her thighs,...

And then,...

But that had been a memory from another time, another woman, long ago.

Hadn't it?

Where the hell was I? Had I slithered across time-lines again?

I looked at the book, flicked through it. There must have been a hundred thousand words, written in perfect longhand – the sort of longhand I'd not written since I was at school, and only then when I

was really concentrating. It was the story, *this story*, Gabrielle's and mine, and it was complete up to where I'd left off last night, at the annexe and my imagined conversations with the strange creature who had claimed to be my soul, a creature who had morphed into the very being of Gabrielle, allowing me to imagine, for a moment all was well, and that I had not lost her. I read the last words I'd apparently written:

And she said: "Don't give up on me, Richard. I'm waiting for you to." Then she told me to have faith in my purpose. But what was that? I asked her. What was my purpose in all of this!

Yours is to try to rescue me, she said. And mine is to finally allow you to succeed....

Bernadette moved closer and touched her fingers to my shoulder. "Sir? Are you all right?"

"No,... I,... I don't see how I can be,..."

"Can I get you something?"

She sounded different. Kind, concerned, but not as assertively intimate as she'd been last night.

"You *do* know me, don't you?" I asked her.

She looked surprised. "Of course, Sir."

"No,... I mean,..." I hesitated. What to say? How to be sure? "Bernadette, this might sound strange but, when was the last time you saw me?"

"Last night sir. We talked. Here. On the balcony. It was such a lovely night." She blushed. "I,... smoked a cigar, which was very naughty of me because those cigars are very expensive. But,... you won't say anything will you?"

"Em,... no,... of course not. I,... appreciated your,... company."

She sighed. "You were very sweet to listen to me."

To listen? That implied a shared confidence, but what? What had she shared with me? "Do you,... remember how long you stayed?"

“It was a few hours. But you, Sir, when I left, you were settling down over the book to write. So,.. it's true: you've been working all night?”

“Someone covered me,...”

“That was me, before I left. You'd grown distant by then.”

“And you brought me the book. This book?”

“You'd lost it. I,... I simply found it for you. It was in a drawer. You don't remember?”

“Had,... had I been drinking?”

“You had a little wine at dinner, with Her Gruber. I brought you a brandy, but it's still there. You've not touched it. You were quite sober.”

“And you were with me,... before?”

“Before, Sir? Forgive me but you seem muddled this morning. You've been working too hard, I think. Should I call a doctor? Or Herr Gruber perhaps?”

“No, I'll be all right, but thank you.”

Her face expressed a genuine concern, but there was a sweetness and an innocence about it. “Promise me you'll rest today sir? Promise me you won't work so hard? This story's wearing you out.”

“That sounds like good advice.” I sighed. “Bernadette, I'm sorry, but for my own peace of mind, I must ask you this: while you were here last night, I didn't say or do anything that you felt was,... I don't know,... inappropriate, did I?”

She opened her eyes wide, as if horrified at the thought. “Why no, sir. You've always been the most perfect gentleman, or I wouldn't have unburdened myself on you that way.”

Unburdened herself? Her troubled heart? I gave a nod, satisfied. I'd not touched her. *Thank God*! We'd talked,... I'd no idea what we'd said, and I could only trust it might yet catch up with me, but the tension I'd always felt around her was now resolved.

I loved her,... loved her so much my heart ached for her, but I was not *in* love with her. I did not wish to possess her. And I remembered then that time with Gruber, or at least the daemon who had taken his form, the daemon who had given Bernadette to me and told me I must find a way of loving her, without wanting her. It hadn't made sense at the time, but it made sense now. And at once I felt a shadow lifting.

“That's all right,” I said. “Sometimes, I worry,... the things I say,... they can come out wrong. I'm much better on paper. My mind is too ponderous for conversation. Too much of a muddle.”

“Oh,... not at all, Sir.”

I looked down at the book. A hundred thousand words, and no memory of writing a single one. I'd been writing for what? Twelve hours? Seven hundred and twenty minutes. About a hundred and forty words a minute? Without a pause?

Impossible!

But as I tried to squeeze some life back into my hand and my arm, I wondered, for how else had it been done? What else was there to believe now, other than that I had channelled it? The journal had become an automatic script gifted to myself, by a sacred part myself, from some other place.

Chapter 49

I saw Bernadette again at breakfast, when she came to take my order.

“Will it be tea or coffee this morning, Sir?”

“Coffee, thank you.”

I tried to appear natural, even though I knew we'd nothing to reproach ourselves for. All the same I possibly overdid it, so the ever watchful Anton wondered what had changed between us – if Bernadette had done or said something to upset me. Or perhaps he even suspected us of the one thing I thought we'd been guilty of, when in fact I'd only dreamed of it.

No,... I'd *not* dreamed it. That was too simplistic. It had been real, a real possibility, a revision of my story I had pulled away from, but even to have considered it a possibility would forever colour my future path, flavour it with something I had not intended but which none the less resided in me at an unconscious level. And it had been so meaningful an event, what difference did it make which version of reality it had taken place in – so long as I carried the memory of it with me?

I remembered the feel of those scars on her legs, remembered my old stories in them, and how, though her flesh had been soft and warm, the scars had been like little tears of a now sealed hardness, unyielding under my fingertips. I gave an involuntary shiver at the memory of what had followed, the memory of where it had led and with what ease I'd entered her, that soft slippery moistness,... a place, a story of great depth, a story for which my heart ached and yet it had led me back, just as she'd said it would, to the one story that meant anything to me,.... and to Gabrielle.

Just then the Lafayettes entered and made for their usual table. Gabrielle appeared shrunken, her steps flat and lifeless, like a marionette handled by a clumsy puppeteer. And at the table she sank securely into the usual hole between her parents. I don't know if she'd felt my eyes upon her, but at that moment she looked up and, like Anton read something between me and Bernadette, and wondered,... or at least I imagined all of this was the case, or I may simply have

been paranoid. Whatever it was, they were too late. Bernadette had settled back into her natural place now, and there remained nothing daemonic about her at all. Only a precious sweetness.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow in query, as if half in recognition of something. Perhaps she expected me to look away, but I remained staring at her, a solemn sternness that once more centred my universe about her. Meanwhile Monsieur Lagrange sat back, tutting at his day old copy of La Monde which he held at arms length on account of his short sightedness. Meanwhile Madame waited, her hands folded upon the table, a stillness about her that was surely uncharacteristic, also a little sinister.

When I looked back at Bernadette, she was writing something on her pad, her tongue pressed against pearl-white teeth in concentration. Her hips were thrust towards me a little, and she stood closer than was necessary so I might easily have slipped my arm around her waist and eased her onto my lap. Yes, there was something intimate in that pose, I thought, something trusting, something that spoke of a thing we'd shared, or not shared, or might have shared. But let the others think what they wanted. I valued it, whatever had passed between us, and I looked up at her now with a smile which she returned sweetly and with a knowing blush, before bobbing away. My balance was restored. It was perfect between us. If only I could restore it in other ways too, then this place might really come to mean something.

I saw Madame Lafayette again later that morning, in Reception. I'd gone to borrow a motoring map from Lagrange and was studying it there, tracing my fingers over its arterial lines. She was demanding of him latest airport information. I was puzzled by this, but then remembered at least the first part of European disintegration was true, that geological events in Iceland had brought all air-traffic to a halt and stranded millions of people far away from their homes. The stock market was also tumbling the economies of Europe, indeed the whole world, into recession.

She was looking at his computer screen, reading the cancellations. Meanwhile Lagrange turned to me.

“There is no boat sailing directly from Genova to Ibiza, is there?” I said.

“Oh no, Mr Graves,... not a regular one at least. For Ibiza you would sail to Barcelona, then another boat from there to Ibiza. It is a long voyage, and expensive, but doable. Might I suggest you drive to

Barcelona instead?”

“That would make more sense,” I replied. “It seems my information was incorrect. Strange, but I was so sure of it.” I laughed. “Never mind. Perhaps I dreamed it?”

“Ah yes,” he said. “Dreams can sometimes be convincing liars.”

Madame Lafayette turned to me now, and I took an instinctive step backwards, something she did not fail to notice, and was puzzled by it. I had the journal tucked under my arm, and I transferred it to safety behind my back in case she made a grab for it, but she paid it no heed, apparently not even recognising it as Gabrielle's. “You are leaving us Monsieur?” she asked and then with a filthy look at Lagrange, she added. “You do not know how lucky you are.”

“I'll be around for a while longer Madame,” I replied. “At least until Saturday.”

“Then you will be driving away?” she said.

I swallowed hard, and guiltily, because if all went well, I would also be driving away with her daughter.. “Em,.. yes Madame.”

“I wish we had driven here ourselves. Now it seems I have no choice but to try the railways. I imagine it will be chaos.”

“I hope not, Madame. The Swiss railways are renowned for their efficiency. If anyone can get you home, they can .”

She granted me a smile then. It was a momentary thing, something breaking on the surface of her otherwise stony countenance and quickly swallowed down again, but for a moment I saw once more something of Gabrielle in her – the tilt of the nose, the angle of the shoulders. I'd had these glimpses before and been puzzled by them, but I was under no illusions that this was anything other than a very dangerous woman, a woman possessed of more ego than a room full of stockbrokers. I simply did not understand what she meant, what she was doing in my story at all. I had written her out once, disposed of her with shameful ease, sent her packing on a paramilitary helicopter, like a doomed refugee. But here she was again, and she seemed to be demanding something in recompense for her earlier humiliation.

Do you not recognise me, darling?

What? My muse?

Of course, who else do you think?

No. That's unthinkable. What do mean by this?

I told you, whenever you look at a woman, it is me that you see. Me that you feel.

Madame Lafayette was intrigued by what she read in my startled expression, but said nothing and made to leave. Unable to help myself, I blushed deeply, then snapped to heel like a loyal servant and held the door open for her. She gave me a strange sideways look and nodded her thanks. Lafayette gave me a pitying glance that told me I needn't think I'd get around her so easily.

“She is frosty, that one,” he said.

I shrugged helplessly. “We can but be polite, Monsieur. And there may be more to her than we know.”

“Perhaps.” He sighed. “And the same might be said for us all.”

Then he produced a pencil and began to outline the best route to Barcelona by road.

Bernadette was in the dining room, now. I could see her through the glass doors, out of the corner of my eye while I listened to Lagrange. Breakfast was finished and she was busy folding table-cloths with Anton, preparing the dining room for lunch. Heinrich was collecting cutlery nearby, secretly watching them, suspicious of Anton, as Anton was suspicious of Heinrich.

Bernadette was the only young and single girl on the staff, therefore an understandable distraction for both young men. How that squared with their roles as adepts I don't know, but even the gods are prone to their jealousies I suppose, and not beyond the hurling of thunderbolts at one another. The thing was, she desired neither of these potential suitors, and with a flash of insight, I realised this is what she'd come to tell me last night!

"*They're both very sweet, sir. But I'm not interested in either of them,... not in that way. I just wish we could all be friends, but Heinrich - he is so easily bruised - and Anton, he would not take my coolness so well either.*"

It was a definite memory, like something breaking the surface of a dream. But how could one reconcile two versions of the same event? At some point realities had split apart. In one, Bernadette and I had done all those things I was so filled with remorse for. And in the other, she had simply smoked one of Gruber's cigars, as a guilty pleasure, sat down at the table overlooking the moonlit lake, and told me all the troubles of her heart.

But she still wore the Cartier!

And why?

Why had Gruber gifted her that watch?

"*The watch was for my mother, sir. It was a gift he never had the opportunity of giving her, before they parted. Then she died. It was long after she'd met someone else and settled down with him.*

"*When Herr Gruber and I met on Ibiza, and realised the connection, he took me under his wing. He's been very good to me, sir. He told me once I am the daughter he never had – though he is not really my father, you understand. He was simply devoted to my mother. But,... the others, they don't know about any of that. I want to be equals with them. I don't want them thinking I have special treatment, because I do not. Except,...*"

"*Except?...*"

"*Except having him accept me as a daughter,... well, it saved me, sir.*"

Lagrange saw me looking. "Is everything all right, Monsieur Graves?"

"Everything's fine," I told him. "I just drifted off for a moment. I had a bit of a late night last night. Tell me, Monsieur, is it true Herr Gruber is in the process of buying another hotel on Ibiza?"

"You mean the Casa del Mar? But that was last year, Mr. Graves. The sale was completed in the autumn. It has been operating under Herr

Gruber's banner since then."

Last year? But I'd thought it was only something he was planning, yet now it was already his! And how come I already knew it? Ah,... no,... wait! Bernadette had told me last night: It was her plan to return to Ibiza, to La Casa, to serve on Gruber's staff there, and only in part to avoid the amorous intentions of Heinrich and Anton.

"It sounds like the perfect solution, Bernadette. I'm sure Herr Gruber would agree to it."

"*But he already has, sir,... only,... I'll be very sad to leave La Maison." She brightened a little. "But who knows? Perhaps one day I may be fortunate enough to welcome you there?"*

"*Ah,... and I would be very glad to make that journey – only Ibiza has a habit of blistering my skin."*

"*Mine too, sir. We would both have to be very careful of the sun."*

Lagrange was watching me carefully, concerned by the ease with which I slipped into reverie. "Monsieur Graves? Can I suggest some fresh air? Perhaps some coffee? I shall send someone out to you."

"Coffee? No. I'm fine, thank you. Fresh air's a good idea though. Perhaps I'll have a walk down to the pavilion."

"Ah yes, it is a lovely morning."

"However,... I wonder, first of all,..."

"Monsieur?"

"If I might make a reservation?"

"A reservation?"

"Yes. I think I need to fix something,.. in time."

Chapter 50

I was crossing the lawn, heading for the lake path when I saw Gabrielle. She had on her shrunken persona, and her dowdiest outfit - a shapeless sweater and a pair of cotton trousers, creased and bobbled with age. I was unused to this - more familiar with the upright Gabrielle, the haughty challenge in her eyes, the proud roll of her hips, a Gabrielle I feared was now lost in a fold of time. I would have mourned her, yet here she was, alive yet somehow lifeless still.

I shrank away from her, unable to work out what any of it meant, conscious only of the need to avoid being seen with her in case her parents were about, because that was what she wanted, and if I could only please her in that one small way, then so be it. But as I hastened away I discovered she was following me.

“Richard? Can we speak?”

I waited while she caught up. “Of course,” I said. “I just thought we had to avoid being seen with each other, that's all.”

She gave me a terse look and shake of the head as if my slowness and lack of flexibility in interpreting her demands really taxed her patience, and then she said: ”Is there something going on between you and that waitress?”

“What?”

“Ah. I can see from your expression there is. *Baise Moi, Richard*.”

“No,... hold on,... there's nothing going on between me and Bernadette. Nothing at all! Really, not a thing. *Not a thing*.”

“Ah, but me-thinks he doth protest too much! Yet there you were at breakfast this morning, both of you blushing like newly-weds. You and *Bernadette*!”

“Gabrielle,... ”

She held up her hands to cut me off. “There's no need to be

defensive," she said. "It's your business, obviously. I only want to know if you will still take me with you, or if I should find someone else."

"Of course I'll still take you with me."

"*Bein*,... I,... I was not sure how things lay between you, that's all. If it changed things, I mean."

"It changes nothing. If you must know, we've been talking, that's all,... she has things on her mind,... matters of the heart. *Tu connais?*"

"Really, I told you: there's no need to make up stories. I won't say anything. I like her. I wouldn't want to get her into trouble. But you need to be discreet. Gruber would surely dismiss her."

"You've got the wrong idea completely."

She gave me a worldly shrug. "Oh, Richard, don't be so *English*. Enjoy yourself,... except you can't, can you? A man who lives by his penis can have no room for a guilty conscience. And I had not taken you for that kind of man."

"I'm not,... I assure you. I was embarrassed this morning; you obviously picked up on that,... but Bernadette has done nothing. She's innocent. If you must know, I dreamed about her last night after we spoke, an intimate dream."

"Really?" she raised an eyebrow. "Is that all? I admit, it does surprise me. You spoke yesterday of having honourable intentions towards me, and I thought; he is an interesting man, this one, a little old fashioned, a little jumbled up, but maybe I can do something with him, you know? And then he takes up with this girl? And now I'm thinking: strange. How he confuses me!"

"Well, like I said. There's nothing going on"

"All right, all right." She smiled again, reading something in me I did not know was there. "You would though,... if she asked. You would do it out of politeness, I think."

"What?"

She smiled. There was something coquettish and playful in it that

reminded me of the old Gabrielle, and caused my heart to flutter. “You heard me,” she said. “If she asked you, you would be too polite to refuse her.”

“You have a very low opinion of my strength of character.”

“Oh? But it was the same with me. No man in his right mind would want anything to do with me. Only an Englishman who was too polite would look at me and say:” she cleared her throat. then continued in a very bad English accent: “*yes, my dear you can come with me. Yes, I will let you ruin my holiday for no reward*.”

“I assure you, it was more than politeness, or do you really think me so,... submissive?”

“I don't know. So,... there's nothing going on between you and her. *Bien.* I wondered what she might see in you anyway that would make her take such a risk? Is it the same thing I see? He is not the hot blooded type, I tell myself. He is an Englishman, after all: cold, confused, clumsy with his hands, and perhaps also a little frigid.”

I bristled at that. “We British aren't entirely unromantic, you know?”

“Yes you are. You confuse romance for sentiment. Don't be a sentimental Englishman for me, Richard. I need a pragmatic one. This is why I chose you. I want a stiff upper lip and a calm head in a crisis, because I am a crisis, Richard. I am a crisis like none you have ever known before.”

I was growing tired of this. “I said I'd take you with me and I will.”

“I'm sorry if my teasing offends you,” she said. “Pftt,.. have you no sense of humour?”

“Not lately.” I caught myself, then sighed, laughing a little at myself. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound,... so,...”

“Grumpy?”

“Grumpy, yes.”

“No. I'm sorry. I,... I was a little jealous,... when I thought of you and her. Do you forgive me?”

“Yes of course. But,... you were jealous? Really?”

“Only a little.” She smiled. “Don't let it go to your head.”

“Friends then?”

“Friends. *Oui.*” We shook hands. “I have no friends, so you are welcome. But I am assured you will not wish to remain my friend for very long. I must make the most of it and avoid offending you any further.” Then she said: “Richard, I must ask you: where did you get that book?”

“To tell the truth, Gabrielle, I'm not sure. Why?”

“I have one just like it.”

“Here, at La Maison?”

She nodded.

“I suspect you might have lost it,” I said.

“Are you saying that's *my* book?”

“How could it be? Look,... it's a story I've been working on. It fills half the pages. You've only been here a few days, and I can't write that fast.”

This was a lie, I know, but in my defence I clung to what was at least rationally feasible.

“Okay,... I believe you. Strange though.”

“You'd never believe how strange. Would you like to read my story?”

What was I thinking? There was stuff in here that, even if half of it were true, would shock her to the core; the things I knew about her, though I couldn't be sure how much of that was still true. I was relieved when she shook her head. Then she asked me: “What is it called, your story?”

“*The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac*.”

She thought on this for a while. “And who are they, these last guests?”

“Well,... you and I of course.”

She gasped: “I am a character in your story?”

“Of course.”

“But how? If I have only been here a few days, and you have been writing this for weeks?”

“Hard to explain. Perhaps it was someone else, someone very much like you. Someone who was also called Gabrielle.”

She thought for a moment. “I like the title. You must not change it, and maybe I *will* read it, but later, when we are on the road together?”

“All right.”

“You will really take me all the way to Ibiza?”

“You like Ibiza?”

“I don't know, I've never been before. But I've heard all about it and would like to dance on a beach there, I think, dance until dawn.” She smiled then made to turn away. “*A bien tot*, Richard. Until later?”

“Later?”

“All right then, not later. But Saturday, at nine.”

“*Je suis presse d'être samedi, Gabrielle.*”

“What? You're *looking forward to it*?” She raised an eyebrow as if she were about to say I would surely end up regretting it, but then she softened and replied that she hoped she would not ruin my holidays too much, then added my French was passable, but my accent a little wooden and if I wanted to impress her I'd be better sticking to English.

Was she playing with me? Was she trying to flirt, or was she merely being unambiguously rude? I sighed. Saturday was still a long time away, Ibiza even further, where a suite of rooms awaited us at journey's end, and I knew better than to assume we would ever leave

La Maison. Indeed the place was taking on such a permanence now, I felt sure nothing else existed of the universe at all.

Chapter 51

Hotels can be a bore for the misanthropic loner. First there is breakfast, for which one attempts to dress with a calculatedly casual chic, and which one attends early enough not to appear tardy, and with a suitably aloof manner in order to disguise the fact one is more interested in what everyone else is doing than in what tiresomely strange concoction one is eating. Then there is the wholesome exercise - a walk, a swim, or tennis perhaps,... and then the relaxation, the reading of day-old English newspapers, and make-believing one is in some far flung outpost of Empire, tolerating the idiosyncrasies of Johnny-Foreigner with a practised tolerance and the occasionally condescending smile.

One takes a light lunch upon the terrace, followed by a snooze in the sun, or another swim. Then there's gin and tonic at the first hint of the sun approaching the yard-arm, before retiring to one's chambers in order to bathe and dress for dinner.

Dinner; an event during which more is made of vanishingly less than in any other sphere of human activity. Dinner sweats beneath its stiff collars, finally to shape-shift gratefully and imperceptibly into coffee, then more drinks in the lounge where there is inane chatter, and the occasional horse-whiny of fatuous laughter. And then there's the gossip, where yet more observations of the strangeness of others are one's reward. And flitting between we denizens of the middle class hotel, unseen, are the uniforms of the well-oiled staff. Strangeness amid the ordinary! Indeed the ordinary, I've come to realise, is simply the acceptance of a set of habitual circumstances, each of which in isolation might seem very strange indeed.

Strange, like the way Carmen kept looking at Anton, and wordlessly offering him her body, though without meaning it, and he, wordlessly, and with infinite politeness, declining with nothing more than a stiff little smile, and a practised tilt of his head. You are a divine loveliness, he was saying, but I withhold myself out of decency and respect for moral values - all spoken, all conveyed effortlessly, without speaking. What remarkable creatures we are! And just because I was imagining all of this, did not make any of it untrue.

That night, after dinner, I watched the guests in the lounge, feeling

myself to be a man alone, a lone Englishman, and therefore not obliged to join in with others of my tribe, of whom there were fortunately none that evening, and whose only commonality anyway would have been their use of language, and who might otherwise have been obnoxious to me.

Thank God for the strangeness of this reality, I thought, or I would surely have chosen never to stay in an hotel again. It would have been a miracle if I'd managed to see Saturday without going out of my brain with boredom, except of course I was braced at every moment for the event that would tug Saturday beyond my reach, and I was quite possibly already out of my mind anyway, for what other description could there be for one whose grip on reality was becoming so loose as this?

“Another drink, sir?” Anton hovered, almost invisible, gesturing to my empty glass.

“Yes, why not? Another G+T, I think. I'll take it on the lawn, if you don't mind. Thank you Anton.”

He gave a little bow, respectful, not subservient. I salute you. I respect you, but I am my own man. And later, on the lawn, with the journal on the table and a pencil tapping at my teeth, free in my own company once more, I watched the sun sinking into the bronze crucible of the lake, and Anton asked me if my story was going well.

“It proceeds strangely,” I told him. “And I hesitate to trust its course at the moment. But what choice do I have?“ And he nodded. The answer meant nothing to him. He'd asked merely out of politeness. He knew I was a writer. He wanted me to know he knew for the simple reason that it's good for guests to feel they are among people who appear to know them. He was the consummate professional, but hid his soul well.

The gin had begun to smooth over the frayed endings of my nerves when Monsieur Lafayette, appeared, very formal in his dark suit, as he returned from an after-dinner stroll by the lake. He cut a lonely figure, I thought, silhouetted against the metallic lustre of the lake; the academic, alone with his thoughts, enthused by the minutia of his subject, a minutia he could not begin to express without also expecting others to do anything but glaze over and nod off. He cast me a glance, and I tipped my head in polite recognition, fast rewinding our relationship to wherever I thought it should be. Then he came up and

in a very humble tone he said. “I wish to apologise, Monsieur.”

I was surprised. He'd said the same thing once before, but by my calculations, he'd yet to punch the wind out of me. “I'm sure there's no need, sir,” I replied.

“No, no. Yesterday, in the garden,... you said *good morning* to us, and I did not acknowledge you. It was very rude of me. I have been feeling guilty for it ever since, wondering what you must be thinking of us,... of me. What kind of people we are.”

“Ah,...” I placed us now. “I believe you also caught me looking at your daughter sir, which was also very rude of *me*.”

He smiled. “Yes. My daughter,... Gabrielle,... she is unwell, you know?... you may have observed?...”

“Em,...” I didn't want to agree with him, though for all I knew he might well have been right, but neither did I want to disagree, so I deflected him. “Either way sir, I apologise.” I stood, and offered him my hand. “My name is Richard Graves.”

“Yes.” He nodded, took my hand, and I felt something pass over me. It was like a darkness leaking out, while the recognition of something else leaked in,... that we were alike, he and I, that I actually respected him, that I might even have liked him, or at the very least understood, and empathised with him.

“Herr Gruber has enlightened us,” he went on. “I had no idea.” He had a firm grip on my hand, but not overwhelming. His shake was brief, respectful, not challenging.

“Enlightened you?”

“Your books. Your Inspector Grantley. He is very popular in France, you know?”

“You must forgive me sir, but I find that impossible to believe.”

It's true, this was a revelation. Grantley was very English. Too English for some – indeed they'd had to make him an American to sell him in America – except, I'd never sold him in America, had I? Or *had* I – maybe here I *had* - just as I had not lain with Bernadette, that she was

Gruber's unofficially adopted daughter, and therefore the possible heir to his estate. I searched my memory. It was vague, like a half remembered fact – something you'd be cautious of repeating until you'd looked it up first. So, what did this mean? Was I not entirely myself? Was I being informed by more than one reality at a time?

Lafayette was saying: “Oh, his persona is straight from the nineteen fifties of course, yet I think you are forgiven for that. His innocence glosses over much of the sordidness of life, I think, yes? We do not see the horror of it in your stories. Your Inspector Grantley protects us. He is like Freud's dream censor. You know this? He shows us what we need to see, but without confronting us with our personal horrors.”

“It sounds like you've made a study of my detective stories, sir.”

“Studied is not the word. I admit to a weakness for the genre. I study Proust for a living, and read detective stories for entertainment. You know Proust?”

“I regret to say not very well. I'm still only a few chapters into Swann's Way, and I've been reading it for decades.” No, wait! I'd read all of *La Recherche du temps Perdu,* and was half way through my second reading. But no,... that was somewhere else, surely? Yet how could one both *know* and *not know* Proust?

He rolled his eyes. “Ah, he bores you?”

“No, no,... it's more that I fail to grasp him. The failure is mine. I lack the,... education perhaps?”

“Do not let your insecurities discourage you.”

He seemed sympathetic, wise. Was this really the same man who'd landed that outraged fist into my guts for daring to deflower his already much deflowered daughter?

“Promise me you will finish it one day,” he went on.

“Finish it?”

“Swann's Way. Take whatever impressions from it that care to stick, and cheerfully disregard the rest, and without guilt, Monsieur.”

I found myself smiling as I warmed to him. “I will.”

He thought for a moment. “You prefer to be alone?”

“Excuse me?”

“You arrived alone, and don't seem interested in keeping company. I merely observe this is so.”

“I do prefer my own company, Sir, yes. I like to be alone with my thoughts,... my words.”

“It is an admirable approach. I envy you the freedom of such self indulgence. But it is not good in large doses. I invite you to join our table, tomorrow, for dinner? You can bear a little society, now and then, I hope?”

“Sir?”

“Will you dine with us?” He shrugged helplessly. “My wife,... she is curious about you. And it will give her something to talk about to her friends when we get home,... that we entertained the author of the Inspector Grantley novels. It will also take her mind off trying to get a flight out of Zurich, which is hopeless at the moment.”

And I thought: no way! But I said: “Em,...thank you.”

And he replied. “*Bien! A demain! Bon nuit!”*

And I replied, still dazed: “Yes,... until tomorrow. Goodnight.”

As he walked away, I tried to imagine Madame Lafayette lunching with her cronies. “And we met Richard Graves, you know – *l'auteur Anglais des romans de l'Inspector Grantley*?”

And he was what? Charming? Entertaining? Sullen? Arrogant? Suspiciously reserved? Oh,... all of those things. And by the way, he ran off with our daughter? “We haven't seen her since. *Salut!*”

Chapter 52

The Pavilion. Sunset. The waters of the lake were a uniform black, bleeding to a pale green as they ran lifelessly to the shore. The mountains were a blaze of orange, their peaks glassy and dazzling, the snowline a little lower than yesterday. And I was thinking: how can this not be real?

I was leaning against one of the pillars, a foot upon the balustrade, hands in pockets, my head in some deep, dark place. And I was thinking if it was true, that this world was merely a reflection of what I expected to see, then the scene would be different, surely? It would be raining for a start, and the mists would be tumbling down from the mountains in spectral waves, obscuring everything, mirroring my confusion my profound sense of isolation and loss. Yet the outlook remained spectacular, uplifting,... exiting,... and incredibly beautiful. Yet for all of its crackling clarity, I was able to grasp precious little of it and, for that evening at least, I found myself no longer minded to try. I was here. I was evidently breathing and thinking, and therefore alive. What more could one ask?

Then came a woman's voice from behind me. “Lovely, isn't it?”

She was tall, voluptuous,... not young, but attractively so. Indeed something about her caused my heart to miss a beat. She had dark hair, a little untidy and wore blue jeans, a thin blouse with a sweater draped around her shoulders. She also wore large Ray Bans, and a gash of red-lipstick. She lowered the glasses and peeped over the top of them. Then she smiled and said: “Boo!”

It was the woman from the beach, the one from my dream within a dream, within a dream – the one who had distracted me as Gabrielle and I lay beside each other, in imagination at least, on imaginary loungers by an imaginary Mediterranean sea.

“Ah,... I was wondering when you'd show up,” I said.

She tossed her head disdainfully and pretended to be hurt.
“Charming,” she said. “And there was me thinking I'd played Gabrielle so beautifully for you.”

I sighed at the memory. “Oh,... but you did. If only Gabrielle herself could play that part so well as you.”

This was a woman in her late thirties, elegantly poised, beautiful, not unlike Gabrielle at first glance. Her voice, that comically posh English voice, was perhaps the crudest give-away. I remembered it clearly from my dream, but the tone of it,.... its plangency,... it belonged to a different woman altogether, a woman who held herself with a studied grace, quite unlike Gabrielle's provocative languor. She stood before me now looking up, smiling, heels together, hands lightly clasped in front of her, every inch the elegant English lady.

“Is hope that watch is ticking?” I said, motioning to the small understated Omega on her wrist.

“Well, of course it is, darling. It wouldn't mean anything, would it, if it wasn't?” She came closer then and smoothed down the lapel of my jacket. It was a move that spoke of intimacy, of proprietorial privilege, and I welcomed it, welcomed the feeling of belonging, welcomed the timeless connection with this perfect stranger.

“You're looking very smart this evening,” she said. “It's so nice to find an hotel where they still dress for dinner, don't you think?”

“You're just old fashioned.”

“Like you then?”

“I suppose so. We're two of a kind.”

“Ah,... but are we two,... or are we halves of the same whole?”

“I must take your word for that. I only wished I could understand it better.”

“Or wished perhaps you could be more accepting that there are some things you can never know?”

“Ha!... Yes. I was thinking that just now. I was looking out there and thinking how none of it's real and yet seeing how beautiful it is, and just trying to open myself to the beauty of it without the need to question it.”

“But it *is* real, darling. It's just a little *different* to what you're used to.”

“I wish I could be more accepting of that too. The most difficult thing for me is this business with the dreams, the fantasies,... I slip into them so easily now,... it's hard not to get muddled up, hard to know which line of time, which trajectory I'm on.”

“Trajectory?”

“You know what I mean. Before, my life was confined to a single course through time and space. Now it's jumping about, following the probabilities somehow. Sometimes my life finds itself in a mess, but I'm able to re-write it, scrub the mistakes out and try a different course.”

“Ah, we're talking about Bernadette, now?”

“Yes,... and thank you for making it so I'd not really slept with her. That would've been unthinkable.”

“Don't be silly, darling. It was me that made it so you thought you *had*. I was *you* who decided to make it so you hadn't.”

“Really?”

“And well done. ”

“All right. I think. But thank you for my story then,... for giving it back to me. I mean, *that* was you, wasn't it?”

She gave me an indulgent laugh, gentle, not mocking. “Yes, that was me.”

“I have a million questions I want to ask you.”

“I know you do.”

“But most of all, right now, I need to know if things will ever stabilise. Will I ever know an unambiguous form of reality again?”

She shook her head and looked sad for me. “The world simply isn't like that any more, darling.”

“So,... this is it?”

“Not quite. You can stabilise things a little better. It depends on how

well you use your last days here."

"At la Maison?"

"But is it really La Maison? Or rather *what* is La Maison? We know what it was *before*. But what is it *now?"*

I felt a shiver run down my spine. "I've had this feeling for a while of being trapped here - willingly, I mean. It's so lovely; why would I ever want to check out and go home? Something came up at dinner the other night – an exchange between me and Gruber - about lotus leaves."

She looked serious. "And what about them?"

"Primary school mythology. Odysseus and his crew trying to get home from the siege of Troy. They stop off at this weird place and some of his crew eat lotus leaves, and suddenly they no longer want to go home. It's a nourishment that sustains them, but takes away their meaning, their drive, their intent. That was significant, wasn't it?"

"It depends. Are you in danger of thinking of La Maison as your home, now? Why wouldn't you? They take care of you here. Your every whim is attended to. Here you can be like children again, living in ignorance of the true nature of the world, the world beyond those mountains."

"You're saying its a possibility? That I might never leave La Maison? That I might never want to."

"In a sense, yes,... and I think you know what that means. Remember, most of those you encounter here will be, from your perspective, daemonic. But you're not here to serve them, nor they you. It is a meeting place, a house on the borderland. You can negotiate your terms, tell them what your limits are, set the boundaries of your reality, draw the lines beyond which they must not cross.

"Oh,... they can be a beguiling crowd, and they'd gladly accept you into their realm. You already know how welcoming they can be,... but your place is not among them, Richard. You're human. Mortal. And you must take your place in the world again."

"Check out, you mean?"

“Yes, you must check out. On Saturday. Like you planned all along. This is your contract, so to speak. Yours and Gabrielle's. Have you not noticed how quiet the hotel is becoming? Everyone's leaving. They are all finding their various ways home now. The season is drawing to a close. Soon you will be the last guests.”

“Then what's preventing us?”

“Ambition, Richard.”

“Ambition?”

“Yes. Yours and hers.”

“All Gabrielle wants is to be free. As for me,... I have no ambition.”

“Oh, that's not true. You're both hungry for something.”

“Hungry for what?”

“*Understanding*, darling. Clarity of vision. You want to see what it is that underlies the world, what it is that causes you so much angst, so much pain. Well here it is. The longer you stay, the more you'll see. The others,... those who have already checked out,... they see nothing of this. But you, you've been dancing with daemons since you arrived. Just be careful you don't dance for too long and they begin to mistake you for one of them.”

“But you're daemonic too...”

“I'm different, darling. You know I am. I am yours. We are halves of the same whole, you and I. We are partners. Ours is a being that chooses to live half in the daylight of a limited and discerning conscious experience, and half in the darkness of the infinite unconscious, in the imaginary realms, where anything is possible.”

“Then,... the daemonic?...”

“The daemonic are shades in their entirety. They live in darkness all the time, in the rarefied stratum of the world soul. They regard us with as much curiosity as we regard them. I understand them, because I live among them, you see? I am your personal Persephone.”

“Then,... no one I've encountered here is real?”

“Everyone is real. But not fully constellated, not fully connected to you. You see this world entirely from your own perspective, and those you meet in it are easily overwhelmed by the daemons you project.”

“Like Bernadette?”

“Yes,... once you start to project, they lose all sense of their own selves and become instead fragments of your own unconscious personality. They can no longer be themselves with you.”

“But I'd thought the daemons were beings in their own right,... not simply personal figments.”

“Your unconscious is limitless, Richard. Where does the human personality end? At it's broadest it's as wide as the world soul, and you have no idea of the marvels that dwell in there, never once breaking the surface of your thoughts. You carry worlds, my love, entire worlds within you.”

“And Gabrielle?.... Gabrielle is real,.... but we're not connected? Not yet?”

“Nothing has changed Richard. Gabrielle is lost, and you must rescue her. Just make sure the person you drive away with on Saturday is the Gabrielle you love, and not the daemon you project, or you won't get as far as Barcelona.”

“And Gruber's watch? We've always had this feeling that we have to find his watch and give it back to him. Is that just a delusion?”

“No. Gruber's watch is the line you draw. It will stabilise this world on your terms. If you find his watch and desire to keep it, then it will be like picking the lotus leaves from the menu and you will never leave. But if you return it to Gruber, it means you have decided to check out, and he will understand. He will respect it.”

“But I have to find it first in order to return it. And it could be anywhere.”

“Don't worry,” she said, laughing. “You're being too literal again. This is not a quest. The watch is symbolic. And anyway, I know where it is.”

“You do?”

She turned to the lamp on the central plinth and picked it up. It's base was recessed, just deep enough to cover Gruber's watch.

“Ta da!”

“No. I'm sorry. That's ridiculous. I can't expect my readers to accept that – they've been patient enough already. That's not real. You made it up. You put it there.”

“Well of course I did, but it doesn't matter; like I said it's only a symbol. The looking for it isn't the point? The point is understanding its symbolic value. You're a Romantic; you should know this. Only the calculating Grantley would think the quest was the point. He would turn over every stone until he found it, and he *would* find it, eventually and at great cost to himself and those around him, and his satisfaction would be unparalleled, but only for a moment. Then he would sink back down into his morose shell, waiting for the next challenge, unable to grasp the idea that he was totally incapable of understanding the true meaning of anything, that it was the *meaning* of things he most sought, rather than the possession of them, and, more importantly, that one needn't actually possess a thing, in order to understand it.” She picked up the watch and slid it into her pocket. “I'll let you have it later. I don't want to run the risk of you panicking and giving it him back before we've done everything we set out to do here.”

“Done everything?”

“We can't leave La Maison until we've got what we came for.”

“We?”

“Yes, *we*. And what we came for is Gabrielle. We want her, Richard.”

“We do?”

“Yes, darling. We really do.”

“I mean,... I know I do,... it's just,...”

“No. It's not impossible. I know it looks that way, but we just have to work it out, that's all, before Saturday. We already know how this story

ends. It ends with you and Gabrielle driving away in that little car of yours. It's what happens between now and then that makes the difference – whether you can both be made share this extraordinary vision of the world, or you inhabit your own worlds entirely alone."

She could tell from my expression I was reaching a limit now. The mind can only take so much of the mystery, before ego cuts in and and rejects it all. But to reject reality is the same as madness – even if that reality is not the one you recognise as your own.

"Listen," she said. "You need to know who I am, now. Not *what*, I've explained that - but *who."*

"You told me last night you weren't a who. That you didn't exist in real terms."

She smiled. "That was there, darling. At the centre of your self, our self, and there's no need for identities. We both know who we are. But here,... well I need,... I suppose you'd call it a cover story. So, here goes: I'm a movie actress. Samantha Lewis? Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Sam Lewis?"

"Then you *have* heard of me? How flattering!"

She sat upon the balustrade and tucked her toes neatly to one side - a mannerism I remembered from the lounger last night. But,... was Sam Lewis real? I did recognise her, truly I did. I could even remember the movies I'd seen her in, but never far from my mind was the possibility that I was making all of this up, and of course the fact that, given the malleability of this reality, making it up also made it real.

"I've been trying to get here for ages," she went on. "Simply awful journey. All flights cancelled. Train tickets impossible to come by. Had to drive myself, and it must have been a thousand miles. I'm simply *wrecked.*" She paused for a moment as if to check these facts in her mind, found they were correct, or at least plausible, then gave a nod in satisfaction.

"Of course," I said. "I'm sorry. Let me walk you back to the hotel."

She smiled sweetly. "In a moment. Let's just admire the view for a

while first.”

So we sat together in silence, gazing out at the scene, and as I sat with her I felt myself more complete than I had ever done, my senses more heightened, the things I saw - the sound of the water and the breeze, and the scent of the air - all were sharp, unconfused by the clutter of the denser reality I'd been born into. And I was thinking that I wished we could have done this more often, she and I, this autonomous thought-form, this image of my soul, embodiment of my most perfect and yet my eternally lost love. I was thinking that human love, like the love I felt for Gabrielle, was never going to be a peaceful love, never so sublime as this,... it was always going to be coloured by the insecurities of our imperfectly blended psyche, always wondering what the other was thinking, always asking the question: *does this person really love me the way I love them?*

And then she said: “Careful, darling. No one knows your thoughts quite the way I do. But, you're on the right lines. Better if you sleep on it. Everything makes more sense when you've slept on it.”

“Ha! Yes,... though sleeping on things here is never such a straight forward business, is it? You never know where you're going to wake up.”

“It's something you've always done - this dream travelling. You've just never been aware of it until now.”

“Then ignorance was bliss.”

“I know you don't mean that.”

She rose, offered me her arm and we began to walk, our pace falling at once into a meditative saunter, and I asked her: “How did we meet? I mean the film actress, Sam Lewis and the obscure Richard Graves. It sounds so unlikely.”

“You don't remember?” she teased. “It was in Manchester, on the set of the Grantley Mysteries. Oh, I wasn't quite so famous then, but we hit it off straight away. We spent a lovely time together. But then I became more famous. I was hungry for Hollywood, and we didn't see each other quite so much as before. And then I found myself seduced by men who seemed more,... confident than you.”

“Then we're,... old friends?”

“Old flames, darling. Except, not that old,... and I *was* beastly with you, so I can understand your reluctance to get tangled up with me again.” She shook her head. “I know,.. I know,.. it was all my fault, and it was your lack of confidence that I loved, and I do miss it, and I *shall* make amends.”

“I think I'm getting used to this. We often stayed at the annexe, didn't we?”

“Yes. Oh, the times we had there. But don't! You'll have me blushing.”

And even as she spoke, I was remembering it all: Samantha Lewis, the actress who played the love-interest to Inspector Grantley. I ran my mind back over forty short and hastily cobbled bread and butter novels - novels I may or may not have *actually* written, of course.

He led a lonely life, poor old Grantley, estranged from his wife, who'd been unable to cope with his unsociable hours. He was a slave to his job, his mobile 'phone ringing mid-coitus, and other inconvenient moments, to bring news of murder most foul and, him being the only policeman in the universe of course, he had to attend. And among this morose mixture of miscellaneous melancholia there was Samantha, playing the part of Liz Bentley the criminal psychologist whose advice the ever-rational Grantley reluctantly called upon when things became incomprehensible – Liz Bentley, who looked at him so sweetly, and dressed with such an improbable chic for an underpaid civil servant, and flirted so shamelessly,... and whose eyes lingered so longingly upon him when his back was turned,...

Would they or wouldn't they? Episode after episode, this was the question. Corny, yes. Trite, yes. Seen it all a thousand times before? Yes, yes, yes. But it worked! It drew the reader, the viewer back for more, searching for, longing for the final denouement – one that promised the sweet reward we all are secretly longing for - for our own selves - and yet which none of us can define and so few of us have a sense of ever realising – perhaps because it does not exist?

Of course if ever they *had* done it, it would have been the end, because the story always concludes with the kiss and the declaration, and the shuddering out of a man's loins into the woman's silken vessel, does it not? It is an end, but also a beginning, for there's always something to follow. It is the singularity, the point of infinite collapse, of

paradoxical renewal.

The trick is to make what follows, follow naturally. It has to be a meaningful transition, the latter state suggested by the former, unlike the TV series of the Grantley Mysteries of course, which I recall was followed by a meaningless celebrity challenge program, and, in the case of the novels,... a decade of existential wilderness.

She was looking at me now chastisement in tilt of her eyes. “Darling?”

“Sorry,... I was just catching up.”

“Yes,... quite a history, isn't it?”

“Yesterday I didn't know you, but today, you're,... an old flame. An actress I met on the set of *The Grantley Mysteries? W*e filmed it in Manchester, you say? Yes, we have quite a history, you and I, one that doesn't exist and yet I feel it forming - vague memories, but clearer by the second, and all of it entirely plausible.

“Yet they're *not* memories. How can they be? I was never invited onto the set of *the Grantley Mysteries*. The producer was an arrogant little twat, hostile towards my having anything to do with it. I didn't even watch the damned episodes when they were screened – I was so fed up with the whole thing by then. Except I must have watched them or I wouldn't have found the celebrity challenge programme that followed so irritating.

“And then again it wasn't a TV series, it was a film, a one off, an over-hyped blockbuster that went straight to DVD, and it was shot in New York because an American studio bought the rights, and changed just about every damned thing except the name of the main character, so I was left wondering why they'd bothered paying for anything at all. And all the actors were American. Except for you and that's how you got your Hollywood break.

“And I've no idea where these images are coming from but they're all potentially true, even though they seem to contradict one another. How can I be mindful of so many versions, none of them complimentary, and yet be so accepting of them all? ”

We paused for a moment, and she steadied me, her hand upon my arm. And quietly, she said: “You're sifting the possibilities, Richard.

Think of it as searching with your fingers through a sandbox. Take out the memories that seem most plausible, most probable, most pleasing, and simply let them be true."

"Really?"

We were at the hotel now, standing upon the lawn, the grass a deep velvety green, turning dewy.

"Samantha,..." Her name felt strange in the saying of it - my whole body resonating as if in response to an age old mantra. "Samantha,..."

"Yes, darling?"

"If what you say is true,... then I need only imagine a future with Gabrielle?"

She gave me a sad sort of smile, and shook her head. "There's the trick, you see? You can make your universe any way that you want, so long as there's only ever going to be you in it. And that's always going to be a lonely place, isn't it? Just you and your projected daemons for you to read symbolically, until they drive you mad. But if you want to share your universe with someone else, then it becomes a mutual reality, and you must both agree on the terms. You can't make someone love you, or want you, simply by imagining it. Being together is more than the joining of hands, it is the coming together of worlds."

"Then it's hopeless."

"And if you keep saying that, the universe will go out of its way to provide the circumstances that match your low expectations."

I hung my head. "I'm sorry,... it's all so confusing. But I'm glad you're here."

"I'm always around, darling. Even when you can't see me. Now, I must go. Listen, why don't we both have a lie in in the morning. It's been quite a marathon, hasn't it? We can take a late breakfast by the pool together – say about ten?"

"All right. But tomorrow,... you will,... still know me won't you?"

"Of course I will."

“And will I see you in my dreams tonight?”

“I'd better leave you alone tonight. I think you've had quite enough of me for one day.”

“And,... one more thing,... if,... if I dream of someone,... is it really them? I mean is their dream self a part of them, or a part of me?”

“You mean if you dream of Gabrielle? You see? Your thoughts are my thoughts darling. To answer your question, it's a projection, a personification of your own feelings, both conscious and unconscious,... and not necessarily for that person, but something merely suggested by that person. You know this. Unless,...”

“Unless?”

“Unless they happen to be dreaming of you at the same time. Then things can get interesting. But what are the chances of that? Right?”

I laughed. “Exactly.”

She looked at me suspiciously. “Be careful,” she said. “There are dangerous times for you, or I wouldn't be here,... I mean like this, not so,... literally.” She took a breath. “I mean it. Tread carefully.” Then she turned and headed towards the lake, headed towards the soft lights that now marked out the line of the jetty, and towards the bulky silhouette of a lone man who seemed to be waiting for her.

Gunther!

There was a boat tied up,... a teak clad motor cruiser, low and sleek, with deep buttoned leather seats. Its timbers glowed in luminous lacquered shades of red and amber while its massive engine burbled away in the still air, all of it projecting a feel of opulence and grace.

He'd come to ferry her across.

“You're staying at the annexe?”

“I never stay anywhere else, darling.” She smiled, sensing my unease. “Don't worry. Gunther and I are old friends.”

She offered him her hand and he steadied her while she lowered

herself down into the rear compartment of the cruiser. Then Gunther cast off. “Tomorrow at ten?” she reminded me.

The cruiser let out a restrained growl as it nosed into the bay. She looked back and blew me a kiss, then wished me sweet dreams, before the cruiser set off at speed towards the annex. I watched it carving out a white line in the darkness, a single pale thread stretched taut, the only tangible thing connecting me to a deeper part of my self. And I knew that somehow tonight, I had to dream of Gabrielle,... at the same time she was dreaming of me!

Chapter 53

My watch was ticking on the table at my elbow as I wrote all of this down, its yellowing dial forming a mandala, a circle of wholeness, of oneness,... a symbol of the self, *my* self. It was a circle of numbers, the numbers themselves symbolic of the imaginary structure underlying the world, the world of Plato and his more mystical geometry. But I was trying to ignore this enticing thought in case it was a dead end, and I focussed instead on keeping my handwriting as neat as the preceding text, trying to capture the essence, the mood of my story once more in the calm deliberation suggested by that gently sloping script. It looked so certain, so carefully considered; how could I doubt the truth of it?

It was around midnight when the knock came. I was sitting out on the verandah, in the warm air by then, dazzled by the stars and wondering how, if I were dreaming, they could seem so fixed, for they were surely steady enough to navigate by. Or was it that, since they were created by my own mind, this apparent fixedness was also an illusion? Might they not have been moving about all over the place and the dream would simply permit it? Would the dream not tell me it was normal and make me perfectly accepting of it? For is it not another mark of the human mind, the ease with which it can be rendered suggestible?

The knock came again. Was it Bernadette? I hoped so. It seemed my daemons had ceased to possess her since the appearance of Samantha, and perhaps that was a blessing, but I still cherished Bernadette's warmth and her sympathy. Or was it Gruber, come to remonstrate with me for seducing her? Except I *hadn't* seduced her, and could not explain this to him, were he to believe the opposite. And why would he not be angry, if she was his daughter? Had she said she was his daughter – no,... she was the daughter of a woman he had loved, cherished,... then he had what? Adopted her? Granted her his eternal protection? I felt my stomach churn. It would be a brave man who crossed Gruber.

Or had he come to demand the return of his watch? Had he remembered where he'd he put it? Had he seen Samantha taking it from under the lamp at the pavilion? Did he think she had given it to me?

No,.. no,... I was not ready to return his watch. Not yet. There were

other guests who must check out before me. Gabrielle and I were to be the *last*. But how could we be the last, if we were to steal away before her parents? That would make her parents the last guests. Oh,... so many plot twists, so many unexplained and inexplicable things!

Again the knock,... each time a little more rapid, a rising crescendo of impatience while I toyed dreamily with my thoughts. Come on Richard, snap out of it! Answer the door *dammit*! Hmm? What was that? Someone knocking?

It could only be Gabrielle.

Her hair was unbrushed and sticking out in mad clumps. She wore a crumpled nightshirt underneath a La Maison towelling robe. She smelled of soap and toothpaste. Her feet were bare, and my eyes lingered on them for a moment – delicate toes, the nails painted pink. I was so familiar with every part of her body, and I wanted her feet to be as I remembered them. They were the same, surely, and the recognition of them came as a jolt, but it was like a dream jolt, and I wondered if they were really the same feet, or if the dream was merely telling me so. And was there a difference anyway? Had my whole life not consisted up till now of a similar dream-woven delusion?

I might have fallen down and kissed her feet, and I would surely have known them by their taste, but she pushed me aside and entered the room brusquely. Then, arms folded, she scowled at me and spelt it out in very plain language: “You will *not* have dinner with us tomorrow night. You will make an excuse.”

“Dinner?”

I'd crossed several universes since my conversation with her father that evening, and had by now forgotten his invitation. I looked at her, her brows knitted together - cross, anxious,... and my heart cried out for her to know me as she'd known me before.

“I forbid it, do you understand?” she said.

And I thought: *Forbid? How much she sounds like her mother now, and how could I* ever *love her mother?*

“Dinner,” I replied. “Yes, I'm sorry. I'd forgotten that. Your father took me by surprise. I didn't know what else to do, or say to him.”

“You will make an excuse. Promise me?”

“Of course. I promise. I'll send word tomorrow.”

She lowered her steely guard a fraction and allowed me a smile. “All right then. It would simply be impossible, you understand?”

“I understand. Truly, I wasn't trying to stir trouble.”

“I know. It was your politeness. It prevents you from thinking ahead. It traps you sometimes.”

“Gabrielle,... on the subject of thinking ahead,...”

Her eyes flickered in alarm. “You've not changed your mind about letting me come with you?”

“What? No. It's just that,... they know me. Your parents *know* who I am. And if you disappear on Saturday, it won't take them long to connect us.”

“Lots of people will be checking out on Saturday, Richard.”

“Still it won't take long for them to,...”

“Do you think they'll call the police? Do you think your Inspector Grantley will be on our trail?” She shook her head. “Trust me, they wouldn't want the fuss.”

And I wanted to reply that there was no need for this, that her father was an admired academic, a gentle and wise man at the bottom of him, that her mother was,... what? What had I been about to say? Something along the lines of her fragility being explicable, excusable, tolerable. Which meant what? That Gabrielle was simply mad, and it had nothing to do with her parent's overzealous protection? That she was just another cross they had to bear, and she should be grateful for their love? That what she sought was a man capable of safeguarding her freedom, without imprisoning her himself, and with the courage to stand up to her parents?

Where had that come from?

“Is it your reputation then?” she asked.

“My *reputation?”*

“As a famous author? You're worried that getting mixed up with me will tarnish your image?”

I gave her a wry smile. “Gruber was obviously over-generous in his praises. I'm hardly famous, Gabrielle, and anyway if an author has a racy image, it gives his publisher something to sell him by. No, if anything, getting mixed up with a dangerous woman like you, kidnapping her, rescuing her,... whatever,... it could only improve my standing.”

“Am I so dangerous?”

“Oh yes,” I teased. “If we settled in London, we'd find ourselves invited to parties so other literary types could come and gawp at us. Hampstead's the place,... always has been,... full of writers, intellectuals, artists,... the whole damned place is awash with them and a more tedious bunch I can't imagine. They'd nudge each other and ask who we were, and others would say, ah well, you know, they were the last guests of La Maison Du Lac. And everyone would sigh knowingly as if they understood what that meant – which is more than I do myself at the moment.”

Her lips twitched, and her tense jaw eased itself at last into a grin. “I think I would like that; to have others nudge each other and ask who we were. How dramatic! Can we not live in this Hampstead place just to have a laugh?”

My heart fluttered. “We? You mean, you and me,... living together?”

She shrugged, dismissively. “You know what I mean. Don't take me so literally all the time!”

“Ah,... of course. But it sounded so nice. And I'm not just being polite.”

“And neither am I being polite, when I tell you I would rather die first, than live with you.”

“Okay.”

“But I don't mean it.”

“You don't?”

She smiled, “I don't mean it so,... vehemently. But I do mean it.” She shook her head, but then seeing the disappointment in my eyes and fearing it might make me change my mind about taking her with me, she added, carefully: “But then knows where we'll end up? Ibiza is a good enough start, I think.”

“Yes, yes,... Ibiza.”

She noticed the journal on the table and introduced a clumsy change of subject. “You were right, by the way. I thought I'd packed the book, but now I cannot find it.”

“I see.”

“But obviously, as you said, this book is not it. How can it be? It's so full of your writing, you must have had it for months at least. And speaking of your story, something puzzles me about it, Richard.”

I was still lamenting that we would not be living in Hampstead, lampooning other literary types. I was lost to the pleasing reverie of it, wondering if I might make it true, as Samantha had said, by merely wishing it. Thus I found myself unable to warm to what I felt was Gabrielle's false curiosity over my story.

I managed a vague: “Oh?” And then she said: ”How can your story be so long already, and we are only just meeting in it? Surely we must be near a conclusion by now, and yet I barely know you.”

“Confusing, isn't it? It's a matter of personal regret, I can tell you. I feel the conclusion approaching like a brick wall, and here we are rushing headlong towards it, yet instead of applying the brakes, and coasting into some neatly ribboned denouement, I find myself now in the position of having to remind you of everything we ever meant to one another, of,... awakening you, in a sense.”

“Really? How mysterious. But tell me, are we lovers, in your story?”

“Of course,” I said, with a false brightness. “How could any man know you and not want you for his lover?”

“But fantasy is such a long way from detective fiction, Richard,” she

sniped. “Are you sure you know what you are doing? Are you not afraid you're simply making a fool of yourself?”

I laughed. Already she was so predictable with her insults. “All right. So, what if it *is* a fantasy?... at least,... well,... I don't know what else to call it, and a man can dream can't he? Indeed, my problem at the moment seems to be waking up. ”

She made to touch the book. “I'm curious. May I?”

“Of course. In fact why not read it? Take it with you. Why wait until we're on the road together? But you must promise to let me have it back first thing tomorrow. It's my only copy, you understand? And very precious.”

“You will trust me with something so precious?”

To tell the truth I was terrified of letting it out of my sight, but it would have been worth it. If nothing else it might jolt her into dreaming of me. And according to Samantha, to have her dream of me would put us both on an equal footing.

“I trust you,” I said. “Is that foolish?”

She ran her thumb along the edge of the book, flicking rapidly through the pages but without settling her attention on anything in particular. “It would make you the only man who ever trusted me,” she mused. “But, Richard, there's such a lot of writing here. It will take me for ever to read it.”

“You needn't read it all,... just skim it. There may be bits that interest you.” Or rather, I was thinking, bits that would remind her of everything we had once meant to each other.

“Let me think about it,” she said. “But,... how can you weave a story around the characters here? They are so ordinary, so lacking in colour. I've been coming since I was a little girl and it's always the same: always a bore. It's so middle aged and middle class,... and nothing ever happens.”

“And you'd prefer what?”

“Oh,” she shrugged, as if casting about for the first thing to come to

mind. “The hedonism of Ibiza? To dance oneself into a trance, and then make love on the beach to a complete stranger. Yes,... the pursuit of pleasure, for its own sake, instead of as some dull, short -lived reward for a year's wage-slavery.”

Ibiza was a persistent thread. I'd lost count of the number of times it had gained a mention in my narrative, though I swear I was not conscious in my choice. What was it then? Think symbolically, Richard, think allegorically: a mythical, permissive paradise? Dance? Wine? Sun? Trance-beats? Shamanism? It all sounded very Bacchanalian - another of the old gods, Bacchus trying to make himself known?

“And Ibiza suggests what to you, Gabrielle?”

“Oh,... orgiastic revelry, the blotting out my consciousness,... my consciousness given up gladly, surrendered in exchange for something else, something,... less painful. Does that sound immoral to you? It is better than eating lotus leaves all our lives, which is what most of us do, and giving up on the idea there might be something better.”

“Lotus leaves?” Another persistent symbol, suddenly. “You know,... I'll be really disappointed it they're not on the menu tomorrow.”

She rolled her eyes. “They are mythical, Richard. I meant,...”

“I know what you meant. And such a thing as you describe,... it can render you vulnerable to your daemons. When you blot yourself out like that, they can more easily possess you.”

“It sounds dangerous, to be possessed.”

“It can be, yes. Your only hope is that your daemons mean well. We'll see. After all aren't we going to Ibiza?”

“Yes,... yes,... of course.”

But her eyes were already narrowed into those defensive slits again. She did not love me, did not see me. I was just a ride out of here. “But will we make it that far do you think?” I asked. “Perhaps what you're looking for, you're looking in the wrong place.”

“Oh? And I will find it where? In your bed perhaps?”

“As lovely as that sounds, Gabrielle,...I,... I doubt that would work for you.”

She almost managed to look insulted. “Oh? Then where? Please, I am curious?”

“In trust. In trusting someone. Until then, nothing you do will ever make sense.”

“Trusting you perhaps?”

“I was hoping you could.”

“But I *am* trusting you. Aren't you forgetting? I'm getting into that little car with you on Saturday, and driving into the unknown. Is that not trusting you?”

“Not really. If you didn't think you could handle me, you wouldn't be doing it.”

“Handle you?”

“You don't feel threatened by me. It's not the same thing as trusting me.”

“And how will I handle you?”

“By skipping out on me the first chance you get. I'll be checking into La Casa alone, I think.”

“La Casa?”

“You did say you wanted to go all the way to Ibiza, didn't you? Well that's where La Casa is. Casa del Mar. I made the reservations this morning, booked the ferry tickets, everything. You want to dance, to lose yourself in sound, and in sex,... then let me take you all the way. Let me be the stranger you make love to on that beach.”

She gasped in mock amazement at my audacity, then flopped backwards into an armchair. “In your dreams, Richard.”

“Possibly. Then it's true! You'd no intentions of sleeping with me at all?” I shrugged. “It's fine. I'm old enough to know when I'm being

played. But still, I've booked the best rooms with the finest views of the sea. Are you not intrigued? Are you not wondering if it might be worth tagging along with me, after all? Going all the way, with me?"

"What were we saying about trust, just now? Where is *your* trust in me? You said you trusted me, yet you don't trust me to honour my promise?"

"Let's say I know when I can trust you, and equally I know when your own desires will outrank any obligations you feel you have to others. It's true, I know you better than you think, Gabrielle, which is why I know better than to take it for granted we will ever reach Ibiza together."

"Then you *don't* trust me?"

"Tell me you'll honour your promise, and I'll believe you. I *will* trust you, even if I suspect it's a lie. But I must hear you promise."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because it's the bargain we make as lovers."

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I,.... I cannot,..."

"That's good. Thank you, Gabrielle."

"Pardon?"

"It means you feel tenderly enough towards me not to want to set me up, so you'll have to betray me."

She laughed. "You're a strange man, you know?"

I felt guilty then, guilty of manipulating her emotions so she would want to stay with me, guilty that I would even try to tempt her with promises of the opulence of a suite of rooms at La Casa Del Mar. I gave a sigh and flopped opposite her on the couch. "It's all right," I said. "I don't really want anything from you that you're not freely inclined to give,... and to give tenderly, lovingly,... without cynicism. They're adjoining suites at La Casa. I can afford it. I'm quite well off apparently. It seems there's more money than sense in Hollywood at the moment."

She stared at me, willing herself not to ask the same question she always asked, the one thing that drove her: the constant need for escape! But she couldn't help herself: “And if I will not do that?” she asked, “Even if you know I will not sleep with you, that I might,... have other plans, once we get away from here, plans that do not include you,... you will still take me with you?”

“Yes. But the question is, if you read what's written in that book,... I mean if you *knew* our story, *this* story, would you still want to come with me?”

She ignored the question. It made no sense to her. It was enough I'd take her without appearing to want anything in return. Her world was closed. She saw it only in three dimensions and it was an unremarkable place. It was her worst fear, this ordinariness, and she could not see it. All she could see were her chances of escape as they revealed themselves, and she clutched at them greedily. If only I could remind her of the things we'd seen together. And if only she could be made to believe in them again!

She glanced at her watch. It was creeping up to half past midnight. Either she stayed and we went to bed and became a little closer to what we had once been, or she left me now, and I saw in the dawn alone to face the madness anew tomorrow. But there was no atmosphere for that, no frisson between us. It was dead and cold and already old.

“It's all right,” I told her. “It's late. Go.”

“Yes,... I must,” she replied. “I'm sorry. I know you like me. I'm just not sure if I like you,.. at least not in the way your hungry eyes are always telling me you wished I liked you.”

Maybe that was true, but I'd seen the way she looked at me, that same expression, the pupils dilated, her eyes eaten up with black. I was not so naïve to have mistaken it for something else. Perhaps then what she'd meant to say was that a part of her wasn't sure if she *wanted* to like me that way, regardless of how she actually felt – that what she was doing was remembering the way she had felt for me once before, but she rejected it now as totally implausible.

“I don't blame you,” I said. “You've little enough to thank the men in your life for. Why should I be any different?”

“Indeed. And why *should* you be any different, Richard?”

“Because I think I can let you go, without fearing I will lose any of the precious love I feel for you. Because believe me, once upon a time, and not so very long ago, I was in love with you. In fact, we were engaged to be married, and then something happened, something intervened,....”

She flinched and looked aside. “You must not say such things.”

“It's all right,... it's just a story.”

“But still,... I'm not sure I like being written about in this way.”

“In case you find yourself believing in it?”

She didn't answer. “I must go,” she said.

She rose at once and made to leave, then paused briefly while she thought about taking the book with her. In the end though, she was afraid of it, and left it on the table.

Her fear was understandable of course. From her perspective, this world was real enough, but *I* wasn't. I was *in* it but patently not *of* it. Impossible as it seemed, I was in danger of becoming her daemon. I remembered how, in that other world, that far away world we'd once known together, she'd taught me to swim more confidently in the deep waters of the lake. Now, here I was, swimming as she'd taught me, far from the shore. Meanwhile she stood watching, arms folded, afraid now to even enter the shallows.

Chapter 54

It's the most extraordinary thing to wake up in one's dreams. All of the senses sharpen way beyond anything you've experienced in your normal life, as the blurry muddle of ordinary dream imagery takes on a remarkable focus. The mind realises it can see and make sense of things, realises too that, while the body lies safely paralysed somewhere, the mind can travel with a freedom it has always longed for. And therein lies the first danger of this kind of dreaming: the sheer euphoria of realising you're in one can jolt you wide awake.

If you wish to linger more than a few seconds then you must make an effort to remain calm. It helps to focus on something familiar, like the backs of your hands, while you push the dream out to the periphery of your vision. The dream will mind its own stability, so it's for you to be mindful of yours. Take some slow, deep breaths until you feel calm enough to stay with things, until you feel yourself settling in, and then you can invite the dream back into a more familiar companionship. Then the dream becomes indistinguishable from reality.

The mistake is to think of imagination, or dreams, or even the seat of your own self, as being confined to the insides of your head. The mistake is in not realising, the deeper inside oneself you go, the greater becomes the reach of your personality, and the wider your potential. That our bodies somehow create this illusion of consciousness is the greatest illusion of all. Consciousness is the ground of being. It is the world soul, and its possibilities are endless. Samantha had told me there are worlds within us, the likes of which we could barely conceive of. What she might also have said was that if we could only conceive of them, then we might make them true.

Thus, I allowed my dream to crystallise into a more tangible form. I was lying on a lounger, on a beach, bare chested, bare legged, sporting an unlikely pair of Bermuda shorts. It was not a quiet beach. There was a crowd of sun-worshippers, lounging or milling about, their conversations seeming muffled to my ears, washed out into an unintelligible murmur by the play of surf upon luscious white sand.

I was confused. Sun, sand, sea? Was it Ibiza? As if in answer to my unspoken question, I saw the back of Samantha's head, but only fleetingly as the crowd closed around it. She'd said she'd leave me

alone tonight and she seemed intent on doing just that, but only after her departing form allowed me to get my bearings, and to place myself in the peculiar geography of dreams. Yes, it was Ibiza. I knew it, even though I'd never been there, just as I knew that, even before I turned to look, beside me on the neighbouring lounger, her skin bronzed and oiled and yellow Bikinied,...

Lay Gabrielle.

Oh, but she was beautiful - her legs long and tanned and tautly muscled, her belly, gently rounded, the inviting depression of her navel catching a smear of sunlight, and her face, almost angelic in its look of repose - all the darkness and twisted debris of her life's trauma fallen away to leave her pure in body and in soul.

Or was I fooling myself? Just which Gabrielle was this? Or was it not her at all? Was it merely a dream projection? Was she nothing more than an image of my hopes, a meaningless wish-fulfilment? Or did she really dream of me, and *with* me, as I dreamed of her?

Whichever version she was, from the looks of her skin, we'd already been here for weeks. Her eyes were lightly closed behind her sunglasses. Her hair was clipped up, so the sun would brown her shoulders and my hands were evidently greasy from the oil I'd rubbed into her, my fingers still tingling from the memory of the heat and the softness of her skin. She was adapting well to this place, absorbing the sun, letting it transform her, her fiery temperament taking more readily to the heat, while my own skin still blistered and the hammer of its daytime intensity wore me out. But there was a cleanness to the air, an almost desert dryness, now, that I would grow to like, I thought.

And I did so love the evenings on Ibiza.

Already then, the dream was feeding me the history of my time here. What was it Samantha had said? It was like sifting through a sandbox with your fingers. You took the impressions, the memories that most appealed to you, and you made them true.

Gabrielle woke suddenly then, as if at the realisation of something forgotten, and she sat upright drawing breath as if she'd been drowning.

“Richard?”

“It's all right. I'm here. You were sleeping.”

She gazed down at her semi-nakedness, and cast about for something to wear. Her robe had slipped from the back of her lounger. I picked it up, shook the sand from it, and handed it to her. She looked at me all the while, and all the while I did not know if this was really her, but I prayed it was. Of all the things I wanted to be most true, I wanted her to be real, and to know me.

What to do? What to say? I know,... a joke: “My shorts? They're ridiculous, aren't they? I've never suited shorts.”

“I,... I dreamed we,... we were in a boat,...”

It was my turn to catch my breath. “A boat? Yes.”

“On,... the lake. You were with me?”

“Yes.”

“We were crossing over? Crossing back to La Maison? You, me,... and Bernadette?”

“Yes.”

“The light,... the light took us,... and,... now?...”

“Ibiza,” I said. “Look, La Casa's over there.” I pointed up to the fine white house, looking out over the harbour. Though I'd never seen it before, I already knew it was La Casa - and was as impressed now by its art-deco lines as the first time I'd stayed there, because I *had* stayed there, dined there, danced there. “Bernadette runs it now,” I added. “Did you know, she was Gruber's adopted daughter?”

Gabrielle turned to one side, felt the clips in her hair and pulled at them so her hair fell down around her shoulders. She stroked her tresses with her fingertips, as if her hair were an alien thing, or something forgotten.

“Which part of this,... am I dreaming?”

I faced her, our knees touching as they'd once touched on a stormy night half way up a Swiss mountain, a night that might or might not

have ever existed outside of my imagination. Gently then, I reached for her hand, and she offered it to me, willingly, and as I pressed her fingers I said: “It's not so easy a question to answer as you might suppose.”

And then she gave me a look, a look that I *knew* and in her eyes I saw reflected all the things we had ever done, and everything we had ever meant to one another. And my heart leaped because I knew then she was still there,... somewhere,... *the Gabrielle I knew.*

“I told you,” she said. “I told you we would be all right.”

I closed my eyes, and in the time between two easy breaths, I bade the dream wash over me, to crystallise, to constellate and fill in the glaring gaps of our presence here, to make it real, *dammit*. All of it! To stabilise it. To grab it with both hands and to hold on for ever! But it was blank. All there was was the beach, Gabrielle and I upon it, and La Casa overlooking the blue-green waters of the bay. We were,... the last guests of La Maison du Lac,... and La Maison du Lac was far away in time,... in memory. Wait!... what was that? There was something! What an extraordinary thought!

“We live here now,” I said. Yes,... we'd taken a house, a place across the headland. I saw white walls, and terracotta pots,... and geraniums.

Geraniums?

All right,... but they were red and pretty,...

“Gabrielle,... I,...”

I opened my eyes, but she was no longer there. I scanned the crowds desperately, but she'd gone. It was as if the light had taken her again, whisked her out of my dream, and I cursed myself for closing my eyes, for wanting even a fraction more than I already had. It had been a glimpse, that's all. It had been a possibility. And I'd been too greedy in my wanting of it.

So,... all right, I thought. It was enough. Enough that I'd had this glimpse, enough that I'd been allowed to hope there might yet be this part of Gabrielle, somewhere, this real and tangible part of her, lost in time and space, but still essentially *there*.

Let it end now. Bring the dream to a close because I wanted nothing more to do with it. Let me go back to La Maison, and finish this. If it had been the dreaming part of that other Gabrielle, the Gabrielle I shared La Maison with now, then perhaps this brief glimpse had planted a seed in her, and she would wake up with a feeling of something changed: a mood, an ache; something, anything that might make her look at me and wonder.

But the dream held on.

I was burning. Surely it wasn't always this hot in autumn? But of course I'd no idea what time of year it really was. It felt like summer. How long had I been here? How many summers already?

There was a shirt by the lounger, so I pulled it on, also a straw hat, and underneath that a copy of The Inspector Grantley Mysteries, intriguingly sub-titled: *the Barcelona Connection*. I'd no memory of writing it, but of course that meant nothing. I picked it up and set off in the direction I thought was right. Or perhaps it didn't matter. Perhaps this part of my present reality was unwritten, or I could write it as I went along,... picking out for myself the place I inhabited, and the life I lived.

Me?

Was it me alone then?

Is that what her going meant?

So, it was true! Gabrielle and I had never made it to Ibiza. She'd skipped out on me, and was posing nude somewhere in an Italian porn studio, while sometimes telling her partner he could stick his penis up his own arse, while the director – did they have directors? - looked on in frustration. No! *Don't even think it Richard, in case you make it true. Remember,.. this is a rarefied reality and the universe morphs more quickly to reflect your expectations.*

Samantha? Was that you?

I left the beach and picked my way up a rocky headland. It was quieter there, more peaceful – just the sound of the sea and the jingle of wind-chimes swaying in a cool breeze that made the heat more bearable. There was a winding road that led steeply up into the village. It looked to be a pretty place, but I chose instead to follow the road round and

over the headland to an even quieter stretch, to another bay, where a line of modern houses were strung out overlooking it. They were white walled, angular, avant-guard buildings with large windows and wide awnings to keep out the sun. There were terracotta pots to break up the starkness of their lines, a profusion of blooms spilling from the pots, like floral fountains,... but there was only one with red geraniums.

That would be mine then.

I had keys in my pocket but, even though I knew I was dreaming, I still felt like a sneak thief as I tried them in the door. They turned with an oiled click and the door slid easily aside. It gave way to a tiled hallway and stairs. The air was scented with welcome – a mixture of polish and coffee and spices. There was a pair of shoes by the mat – scuffed Oxfords, comfortably worn – my own shoes, my most comfortable pair.

There was a lounge and kitchen on the ground floor – the kitchen large and minimalist, black granite worktops and chrome fittings, also a huge coffee maker as a centre-piece – exactly as I would have wanted it. In the lounge there was an expansive sofa in soft leather that occupied two walls, a plain oak dresser on the other wall, while the fourth side of the room was entirely glazed and looked out over the bay.

In the centre of the room was an oak-framed coffee table with a glass top. It held an assortment of novels, all English. In the middle of the table there was a bowl containing a profusion of bits and bobs: keys, some la Maison pencils, some small change, curious pieces of dried seaweed, shells, bits of driftwood, beach worn glass in exotic shades of blue and green. And there was a compact camera, a Canon Powershot - rather old - bearing the scuffs and scratches of my travels. Sure,... I remembered it; I'd carried it across the whole of Europe this past decade. The last time I'd seen it, it had been among my belongings at La Maison. How curious it should turn up like this!

All of it was familiar.

All of it was mine.

I could smell the faint perfume of polish again, and there was a gorgeous light flooding through louvred window-blinds, painting divergent lines of shadow across the plaster walls, and the walls enfolded me, embraced me. I felt myself washed through with a feeling of love, and warmth and familiarity. I felt it nourishing me, energising me. It was home.

So,... I never did make it back to England. I settled in the Balearics, on Ibiza! But there was also an oppressive loneliness lodged in my breast. There was no woman here. This was clearly a bachelor pad.

Upstairs confirmed it: two bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the bedrooms I was using as a study – my old laptop sitting on a stout desk, along with a bowl of assorted pen-drives. A bookcase contained the familiar contents of my collection from home in England: Jung, Wilbur, Huxley, Krishnamurti, Aurobindo, Seth, Agatha Christie,... and more Grantley novels I did not recognise, nestling among the familiar ones, the ones I remembered writing. Okay, so I was evidently writing again. Grantley had followed me here and persuaded me that while he might be a boring old logician, he paid the rent like no other genre and why did I not let him live?

So he lived.

In the remaining bedroom, the main bedroom, the space was dominated by a huge bed, while another glazed wall gave out onto a balcony and the dreamiest sea-view. There were also two dressing tables, his and hers – one of them empty, not a lipstick, nor even a speck of powder, while the other, mine, bore only the sundry items of my modest grooming kit.

There were two sets of wardrobes, one reasonably well stocked with masculine attire that looked as if I might approve of it – including a white, Gruber-type suit. The other wardrobes were bare, the newness of the wood wafting from the empty space when I opened them.

At the bedside, what I took to be my side, there lay my pocket watch atop another Grantley novel. It seemed I no longer carried the watch. I'd grown out of it, and kept it instead as a sort of memento of past times, of my times at La Maison. Instead, on my wrist there ticked rather a fine vintage Rolex. And my arms I noticed were more uniformly brown now, not blistered as they had been on the beach a moment ago. I was settling in then. Years were passing even as I stood there. They were not ageing me, at least not noticeably, but rather they were deepening me, embedding me into this place, this life, this peculiar conclusion to my story.

But as ever, what *was* my story?

On the floor, by the other side of the bed my eye was drawn to a novel. Its title was written in German, and therefore indecipherable to me.

There was also a bra in black lace and incredibly sexy in its fineness. It had been tossed there and apparently forgotten. I froze for a moment before picking it up; there was evidently a woman in my life after all! But it looked too small to be Gabrielle's, and it carried a scent I was unfamiliar with.

The bathroom, I thought! The bathroom would tell me more. And in the bathroom, I found the cabinets uncluttered; there was just soap, and a minimal masculine selection of deodorant, shower gel, and shampoo. There were two toothbrushes however.

I was at a loss.

Come on Grantley, what does this mean?

"*A lady friend, Richard,"* said Grantley from somewhere in my head. *"A steady relationship, reassuringly sexual, and regular enough to warrant the toothbrush, though not enough to warrant a spare pack of tampons. Whoever she is, she is clearly not Gabrielle. That bra is a 32B, old boy and therefore supports quite a daintily proportioned maiden. Gabrielle is at least a 34D, an altogether more substantial proposition."*

"But I don't want anyone else," I protested. "And no one else would have made me want to settle here. It's,... just so unlikely. Why else would I have settled on Ibiza?"

"*What about Bernadette?*" said Grantley. "*You knew she was coming here. She told you she was coming to work at La Casa. She was driving Anton and Heinrich crazy with their unrequited lusts. Gruber thought it was the best thing."*

"Bernadette? But I'm past all that. I was,... I was merely projecting,...."

"*The German novel?*" Grantley cut in. "*Bit of a pot-boiler if you ask me, judging by that cover illustration – the sort of thing that would interest a young girl. And the other thing about that bra is, you have to admit, it rather looks like it might be one half of a matching set for those pants you saw the other night. And you know she's always been soft on you.*"

"Have you gone weird on me during our estrangement, Grantley? She's just a kid."

"*Richard,... this is Ibiza. And some girls like a much older man. It makes them feel safe. Secure. But there is a way to confirm it you know?*"

"You mean,... go up there, to La Casa and speak to her? Sure,... okay. I'm on my way. But I'm not sure how much longer this reality will last. I can't sustain it that long. It could end at any moment."

"*No. It's much simpler than that, Richard. Look, you're right, I admit the German novel and the bra,... they're possibly circumstantial, possibly a couple of corny red herrings, but what about the camera? Why not go and have a look at it? Have a flick through the memory card. There should be a clearer story in the pictures you'll find on it.*"

The camera! He was right! "Grantley, you're a genius!"

"*I know, dear boy.*"

I was down the stairs in an instant and bursting into the lounge, my eyes fixed on the coffee table where I'd last seen the camera, but it was no longer there. I cast around for it, only just realising I wasn't alone. Samantha lounged upon the sofa, yellow bikinied, like Gabrielle had been, only she also wore a semi-transparent azure sarong, and her hair was now inexplicably blonde and bleached almost white by the sun. In her hands, she cradled the camera.

"No, you mustn't," she said.

"But I need to know what's on it."

"This is just a possibility, Richard. What's on here isn't fixed yet. But by viewing it, you might make something improbable more probable, if only because you fear it might be true. Remember – you should be careful of what you wish for."

"You said you were going to leave me alone tonight."

"And it's as well I didn't."

With that, she raised the camera to her eye and took my picture. There was a burst from the flash, and the last thing I remember is her smiling. Then I was waking to the same light-patterns in my eyes. But the patterns were from sunshine pouring in through the windows of my

rooms,...

At La Maison Du Lac.

Chapter 55

I sought refuge in coffee and day old English newspapers at a table by the outdoor pool. I was meeting Samantha for breakfast but I was early and for now I wanted only to re-establish a sense of normality, if such a thing were even remotely possible here. I wanted to get my feet back on the ground of whatever this place was, because it *was* a place. I had no choice but to think of it this way, if only because it was somewhere I evidently woke up to each morning, a place that consistently pulled me back in order to make a reckoning of myself, my thoughts, and my impressions of my surroundings. And what else is reality? I might have been more accepting of it, willing even perhaps to settle in, if only it had not felt like such a lonely place.

The morning had clouded over, and the mountains were lost in a languorous mist, the air glutinous and warm. The potted bamboos that screened the pool were motionless and silver tinted. There was rain coming, I thought, possibly a storm.

I had my camera with me now. Logically speaking I'd taken no pictures of La Maison with it yet – only some on the long drive here, but I hesitated to hit the power button in order to confirm this. I wondered if, whatever pictures were recorded, they would be the ones I'd merely expected to see, that the actual reality of my life was something else, something between the pictures, the memories, a thing suggested by them, but not quite crystallised into awareness.

I was distracted by the De Luca girls, peeling off their robes to reveal willowy bodies, their olive skins emphasised by yellow bikinis. Yes,... yellow, and I know all of this was being suggested by things both real and unreal, but I had no other choice but to flow with it. They waved, smiled, and teased me to join them, but I made my excuses as lightly as my blushes would allow.

Surely they had not always been so willowy? My memory, and the earlier pages of this journal reminded me that Carmen in particular had once been a more powerfully voluptuous creature. Had my vision of reality become so plastic now I could view it in whatever way I chose? I looked down at the coffee cup, and willed it to change into a mug, or a spoon, but it refused and I felt stupid for trying.

The girls lowered themselves into the thunder black water and began to swim, laughing and splashing, and shattering the womb-like silence. I felt trapped now, wanting to retreat somewhere quieter, but not wanting to seem rude by leaving as soon as they arrived, and anyway,... I was meeting Samantha.

She arrived, fashionably late, Anton in tow with silver platter held shoulder high and gleaming, fresh coffee steaming aromatically.

“Good morning, darling,” she purred. “I see you're enjoying the view?”

She wore a dress, swing style – black and white polka-dots, creating a mono-chromatic, kaleidoscopic dazzle of movement as she walked. It was mid-morning but she looked like she was setting out for an evening of dance. I'd seen this dress before of course. Gabrielle had worn it that first night we'd tried to row away from the island, and that was the essential connection, the reason Samantha wore it now. It was to remind me of something. It was to adjust the mood of the moment, to colour it.

Her legs were bronzed, and long and lovely, and she wore black high heels that clacked upon the tiles. The heels lent an exaggerated roll to her hips that Anton did well to admire, without appearing to be doing so. If I'd invented her I had to complement myself on doing a pretty good job, but of course there was something disturbingly autonomous about Samantha that made me hesitate to take any credit at all for the way she looked.

I rose, respectfully, while she settled at the table and arranged the folds of her dress. She was a part of me, and appeared both warm and gracious, but there had been a sufficient number of dark times in my past to know she could also be a vengeful creature, if I did not show respect – or worse, if I ignored her complaints altogether. She looked up at me, smiled her permission, and I took my seat once more. She peered at the newspaper, down the length of her nose, which she then wrinkled as if she smelled something suspicious.

“But this is such old news, Richard.”

“Not so much old, Samantha, surely? It's more likely I see here only what I expect to see, no matter how old or new it is.”

“Ah,... touché. You're catching on. So,... accepting all of that, tell me,

what about this volcanic ash cloud? Isn't it dreadful? At this rate, we could be trapped here all summer." She was smiling gamely, her eyes twinkling playfully, testing me, teasing me.

"We've already been here all summer," I said. "Indeed several summers, for all I know, possibly even zipping off to Ibiza for the winters inbetween, perhaps?"

She clapped her hands in delighted approval. "Oh, Richard,... now we are truly swimming together."

"It feels more like drowning to me, so don't let go, okay?"

She looked grave for a moment and took my hand, pressed it to the table, so I knew that for all of her playfulness, she was serious in her intentions. "I won't let go," she said, and she squeezed my fingers reassuringly. "Not this time." Then she picked up the camera, switched it on, and began to flick through the photographs. "Have you looked at them yet?"

I shook my head. "I was trying to keep my options open. That's what you were trying to tell me last night?"

"Yes. It was very clever of you, by the way, arranging all of that. I didn't expected to see you there."

"Gabrielle was there too, briefly, wasn't she?"

She nodded.

"What happened? Did she wake up?"

"It's possible."

"Will she remember it?"

"Again, it's possible. I am not her keeper, Richard and I don't know these things for sure." She was looking at me, her eyes following the minutest movement of my face, scrutinising me, looking through into the heart of me. "What did you make of it?"

"That it was real. Or rather it was a real possibility."

“So, tell me, what was the back-story to that dream?”

“Before or after Gabrielle disappeared from it?”

“Give me both versions.”

“Before she went, it was the happy ending I'd always wanted.”

“All right. This is something we shall aim for, obviously. But afterwards?”

“The version where I was apparently living alone? I'm guessing I'd left La Maison with Gabrielle, the Gabrielle I know here, the Gabrielle who doesn't really remember me. She skipped out somewhere along the way, like I've been suspecting all along. I carried on to Ibiza, stayed a while at La Casa, if only because I'd booked those damned rooms and it was somewhere to aim for. Maybe later I began to rent that place overlooking the bay. I know I began writing again. Then Bernadette came to work at La Casa, like she said, and she and I,... eventually,...”

Samantha was regarding me now with a raised eyebrow. “All entirely feasible? ”

“Me and Bernadette? No. That was just something suggested by my previous unfortunate fantasy, wasn't it?”

“Again, it's possible. But, she's lovely. She's exactly the sort of pretty, fun loving girl to brighten up your dull and dusty life. Why hesitate to embrace that version of things?”

“For the same reason you prevented me from embracing it in the dream, if for example I'd found pictures of Bernadette on that camera, smiling at me with a lover's eyes.”

“Same question: why hesitate to embrace it?”

“You mean apart from the fact she's too young for me?”

“Oh, but she does adore you. And she so needs a father figure.”

“No, she has Gruber for that. And all right, maybe a daughter figure would do me good, but when she's an attractive middle aged lady, I'll be a doddery old fool. And then some n'er-do-well tousle-haired

romantic of a writer will come to stay at La Casa one night, and she'll see in him what she once thought she saw in me. And I wouldn't blame her, but that's *her* story – not mine. My story concludes with Gabrielle, or no one. We are the last guests, she and I, and I'll either find her again, or spend the rest of my days alone and thinking of no one but her. And that bra and that book I found in my bedroom belong to a pretty German tourist I picked up at a bar the night before, because I was *lonely*, dammit. And all there is on that camera are pictures of sunsets from the balcony of that house, and bits of dried seaweed from the endless days I spend beach-coming and waiting in vain for Gabrielle to come back to me."

She clapped her hands again excitedly. "You see?" she said. "You see, how easily you create such beautiful realities for yourself?" She crossed her hands over her heart. "Oh,... the pain the loss,... it's exquisite. And it *exists* Richard, exactly as you say. I've already seen you; you are an old man, waiting for Bernadette to come home of a night, but also wishing she would have the courage not to. I've also seen you on that beach, waiting stoically for Gabrielle, year upon year,... Bernadette, up at la Casa, your only friend and confidante, and she never married because the only man who would ever do was you,... and that tousle-haired writer? Well,... he never did show up. Oh,... how those stories make me ache. What sweet longing. Shall we make either of them true, Richard? Oh,... do say yes!"

"All right,.... all right, I get the message. Last night, you wouldn't let me fix either of those realities. You wouldn't let me see the pictures on this camera. You wouldn't let me realise my worst fears, that Gabrielle wasn't pictured in it. Why is Gabrielle so important?"

"Well, that's obvious, silly; because you're in love with her."

"I mean why is she so important to *you*?"

"Because she'll be good for us, Richard. I chose her. I made you fall for her, remember? Rescuing her brings you closer to me. It releases me, and I do so hate to be cooped up. You know how things are when I'm feeling cooped up."

"And what about *them*?"

She moved her eyes from side to side then leaned forward in mock conspiratorial intimacy. "*Them?*"

“You know who I mean: Gruber,... and the staff here. Ever since I came there's been this plot - the stage set, and Gabrielle on display every night at dinner, sitting between her parents like a tantalising treasure, or like the bait in a trap, and they're all telling me to take a shot at her. What difference does it make to them? Gruber once looked at me in all seriousness and asked me if I realised how important it was, and I didn't understand. So tell me, why is it important?”

Samantha took a sip of her coffee, then looked away and watched the De Luca girls for a while, smiling indulgently at them. But the smile was a mask. She was troubled, and when a man's soul is troubled, he'd better watch out.

“Samantha?”

“They want you to succeed, Richard. You must believe that. They want to be a part of that story, the story they are weaving for you. This is not a romance, my love. It's more than that. You are writing a myth, and the daemonic do so love a good myth. It is their natural environment and you are to them like all the mortal bards: you are their champion. If they see you falter, they shall pick you up and carry you over the finishing line.”

“So, I should be happy to have them on my side?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why the long face?”

She sighed. “You know the boundaries between the mortal and the daemonic are no longer what they were?”

“Jung explained that. I think I understood it, yes.”

She frowned. “You know what schizophrenia is?”

“Of course. It's a mental illness.”

She rolled her eyes as if I'd barely answered the question: “One way of thinking about schizophrenia is that those lost to it have been overwhelmed by their unconscious. They drown in it. They hear voices, see things,... they are devoured by the daemonic.”

“I thought the daemonic were benign.”

“The daemonic are not malign by nature, just ambiguous. Are you not afraid of Gruber? Deal openly with him and the experience is an enlightening one, yes, but you've also sensed the manic intensity in him, feared his wrath over your equivocal relations with Bernadette. Their world can appear chaotic to our eyes, like a drunken orgy: senseless, bizarre, overblown, theatrical, even horrific. And mortals cannot live in it for long. It would be like one long, and very bad acid trip.

“It's important we work within limits, you see? The world-soul strives towards clarity and order. That's why what we call reality is important. It imposes limits on the daemonic. In the real world you either did or did not make love to Bernadette. The events are mutually exclusive. In the daemonic view however, you both did and did not make love to her. The difference is unimportant to them. But which condition, do you think allows a greater potential for self-reflection, for self understanding?”

“Following a single time-line makes more sense to me,” I said. “But only because I'm mortal, surely?”

“And is that such a bad thing? Would you rather be mortal and able to choose your path, or would you rather be like them, immortal, and able to have it all at the same time?”

“I,... I couldn't live that way. I,... think we have the potential to be more highly evolved, if only we could find ways to stop killing ourselves. If only we could all wake up and realise we're swimming in this lake, teeming with possibilities. My God, it's true, isn't it? We *are* important, every one of us! Every single life that's lived on earth.

“I was thinking they were wiser,... guiding us to a better end,... but they *need* us. They can't be discerning. They can't live in the conscious world. For that you need something else, something pared down, you need an Ego, you need memories, a sense of time so you can order things and make better sense of them, assemble them into a self-image. And you need a time limit. Three score and ten, and then you're out. If you knew you lived for ever why bother focussing on anything, because you already have the essential knowledge of your own immortality. Please stop me, Samantha, if I'm confusing minor insights with delusions here.”

“No, you're doing very well.”

“But we also need *them*, we need to keep a channel open to them, because that's where our insights come from - our love of art, our appreciation of beauty, our moral compass. Unless we can keep a channel open between our conscious ego and our unconscious soul, we're nothing more than robots, and we have no meaning.”

“Yes, Richard. But equally we must be careful in our dealings with the daemonic.” She shook her head and gently touched my arm. “They do not want an orgy. Yes, they value our restraint. We fascinate them. They respect us and they will gladly guide us if we want them to. But if we lose our minds, if we start to drown in them, then an orgy is what they will have with us, because that is their nature. They simply cannot help themselves.”

“You're saying the world will go mad?”

“Is that so difficult to imagine? It's been torn apart by daemonic orgies often enough. Things will stabilise again, eventually, because that's what the world soul tends towards, but the world may be a very different place by then, and certainly not one of our choosing. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can escape it. We can create a stable reality, and have it mean something.”

“Now,... there you go. What should it *mean*, Samantha? What is my purpose? What drives me? What is my destiny?”

“Oh, Richard, my love. You are so hungry. Each of those questions hides the answers for all the others. Your destiny is the same as all those born to mortal life; it is to return to the world soul when you die. It's where we come from and, all our lives, we long to go back. In life we simply mistake it for a quest, a hunt, a mystery to be solved, like a crossword puzzle, that our lives must be *improved* upon by *doing* it, by solving *it. But it's an illusion.”*

“All right,... then my purpose in life,... the meaning of my life,.... the reason I'm alive? There must be a reason for it?”

“Your purpose isn't something you'll find like a treasure in a box. It's more something you've simply forgotten, because you're too busy thinking about looking for the box.”

“Do you know it?”

“What?”

“My *purpose*. Do you know what my purpose is? Do you know why I am alive? Dammit!”

“Of course. But it's a secret.”

“You mean you can't tell me?”

She looked around again, as if to make sure no one was listening, then leaned close, her hand upon my shoulder so she could draw me near enough for her to put her lips to my ear. “Shall I whisper it to you?” she said.

“Are you having me on by any chance?”

“No,... shhh,... listen: *you're here to make way as best you can, to see the world and yourself in a positive light. Only then will you be capable of feeling love, and worthy of being loved in return.”*

“A love story? My life is a love story?”

“No,... yes,... It is a myth, Richard. Your life follows a mythical pattern. Oh,... why did they stop teaching mythology in schools?”

“Because it was boring?”

“Because,... because we lost our connection with it.”

“With what?”

“The truth.”

“God help me, Samantha, you're going round in circles. What is the truth?”

“Have you forgotten it already? You've just explained it to me yourself: that you live not only in the world, but also in your head, and to neglect either reality is to invite,... misfortune.”

“But,... but,.. these are just dreams. Any reality I create would be

peopled with my own projections, that's all. You would be the closest thing to another person in it. A man and his muse, alone in a perfect paradise they created to suit themselves, lifting only the nice things from that sandbox and pushing the unpleasant ones back in. What sort of reality would that be?"

"What sort of reality do you want, Richard?"

"I think,.... I just want to go home."

"And so you shall, my love. But the world you left behind when you set out for La Maison across the dark waters of the lake, is gone. You must make a new home now."

"Ibiza?"

"Ibiza is a metaphor."

"An island? I don't want to be an island. I've been an island all my life,... I just want to be,... with Gabrielle."

"Then think of Ibiza as somewhere warm and beautiful at the centre of your self. And believe that she will come. And she *will* come. Now,... why the long face?"

"It was something you said yesterday."

"Oh?"

I turned to the journal and began flipping through it, first to make sure I was not mistaken, and second so I got the words just right. "Page 444," I said.

She was ahead of me. "Ah,... yes: *….across all realities, she is always just a heartbeat from loving you. That is what you are, the two of you, what you gift to the pullulating ground of human experience,....*

"But it's not enough," she went on. "You don't want her to be always a heartbeat away from it. You want her to love you, and more: you want to look up into her eyes just at the moment she realises it."

"Yes."

“And you are not alone in this. You must believe God wants it too. *That*, Richard, is your purpose. It is the song you sing, the story you write. The daemonic are captivated by the possibilities, by the harmonies in your song, and will help you all they can, but we must be careful not to overexcite them, or you and Gabrielle will never leave here.”

“Is it really as bad as that?”

“Richard, you know what it's like here. You've only to drift off for a moment and you're skittering across time-lines. Imagine, never knowing from one moment to the next where your consciousness is going to surface. Imagine trying to hold on to the one reality you have come to love, if only because it's lasted longer than any of the rest. Imagine being afraid to sleep? Imagine looking into Gabrielle's eyes and seeing the love shining from them, only for you to fear that you might blink and be torn from her again.”

“You said I could fix it, stabilise it. The symbol – Gruber's watch. I give it back to him. Let him control the inner space again, while I control the outer.”

“But are you ready to do that? Would you fix it now?”

From the pocket of her skirt, she retrieved the watch, gave it a wind, then slid it across the table to me. I recoiled. “Not yet.”

“But the guests are checking out, Richard. They are making their various ways home. Soon you will be the last.”

“I'm not leaving without Gabrielle.”

She smiled and slipped the watch back into her pocket. “Well then. So long as we're careful, but have you seen the menu for dinner this evening?”

She slid a copy of it towards me, and there, included as a joke, I hoped, from Gruber to me, was a salad comprised mainly of Lotus leaves.

Chapter 56

I remember lifting my face to the sky. It had begun to rain, the first fat spots spreading ripples upon the pool. It was a warm rain and it felt soft on my upturned face. The De Luca girls swam on oblivious and I watched them for a moment.

It was curious how I could admire their curves and the teasing roll of their thighs as they swam; it was an admiration untroubled by the erotic. These girls meant nothing to me beyond a comfortably detached satisfaction that there could be such beauty in the world, that God might even be appreciating it at this moment, through my eyes. It even occurred to me that such beauty meant nothing without me to fasten my eyes upon it and reflect it back into the unconscious depths of our collective being. And if my vision was clear enough, I thought, then it might shine, laser like, all the way back to the soul of the world.

And then what?

I did not want to go back to my old life, to my old way of seeing. It had been devoured, eaten up, shredded by daemonic orgy and now I was here, in this half-way place, this semi-mad place, trying to learn a new way of thinking and seeing, and being. Samantha had likened it to swimming and cautioned me that as a mortal man I could not submerge myself among the dark daemonic depths for long without being lured by their siren voices to my death - if not my actual physical death, then at least psychic. I would drown inside my own head, among my own thoughts. I would indeed go mad, lose my reasoning, my sense of discernment.

When I looked back, Samantha was no longer there. I didn't remember her going, but then all dealings with one's soul are mysterious, and I did not trouble myself over it. I'd be seeing her again soon enough, I thought. For now all that remained of her presence was a teacup, a smear of pink lip-gloss on its rim, and the scent of jasmine.

Anton came to clear the table. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you Anton.”

Samantha was right; we operated within the strict limits imposed upon us by space and time. We discriminated. We built our worlds in logical steps. And it was only through such discernment, such enforced restraint there was sufficient pause in the daemonic mêlé, for God to be able to see the reflection of His own face. That's what it meant to be *human,* to be alive. To court the daemonic was a part of our mortal contract, something the wise world had long ago forgotten, but in remembering it now, we would do well not to forget that to court the daemonic was also to court the dead, and the dead did not know how to live, except through us.

I took shelter from the rain in my rooms, settling down at the table, to write all of this down, and then to consider how best to pen my note to Gabrielle's father, how best to tell him I would be unable to join him that evening for dinner, how best to excuse it without appearing rude. Truly, I regretted this; I'd begun to see through his manner and saw a man of great depth, a man overlooked by those around him - his enthusiasms, his insights, which were all the world to him, entirely unshared. In short I saw in him a reflection of my own self. Why should I let him down? Because Gabrielle said so? But who was this Gabrielle to me? She was further from me than the dream figment I'd spoken to so briefly last night.

Dinner with the Lafayette's? Gabrielle would never speak to me again. But so what? I did not want this Gabrielle. I wanted that other, the other who had been only a heartbeat away from loving me. But what else was this Gabrielle, if not a new beginning?

There came a knock at the door. Gabrielle? No. It was Heinrich, waist-coated, smart, hair slicked back and with a self conscious expression that betrayed his youth.

“A note from Monsieur Lafayette, sir.”

“Oh?”

He passed me the note, then departed with a faint bow. It was penned with an angular, spiky hand – hurried energetic:

My dear Mr Graves,

Please accept my humble apologies, but I find I shall be unable to honour our engagement this evening. Please believe me when I say I

cannot overstate my disappointment. However, as circumstances would have it, at the same time I was making the invitation to you, my good lady was also receiving an invitation to dine with Samantha Lewis, the actress.

For myself I do not know what we have done to warrant such celebrated patronage, but my wife and daughter are perhaps understandably more flattered by it than I, and it is my hope that you will be the least offended by our back-word. Personally I am dreading the occasion since I find I am least myself when in the company of those who are unlike myself.

I very much enjoyed our conversation and hope we can become better acquainted in the future.

Yours sincerely

Jean-Luc Lafayette.

He sounded sincere - the only obvious lie being Gabrielle's excitement at the thought of meeting an actress, famous or otherwise. Gabrielle was far too self-absorbed to be impressed by anything so apparently shallow, though I trusted she would, in the end, be impressed by Samantha, by my soul, even though she was hardly likely to see the connection.

I leaned back and screwed up the note I'd been struggling with. Why had Samantha not said anything? Or was it that she'd only just made the invitation, back-dating it in time somehow; this was no ordinary reality, and for all I knew such things were possible – at least for semi-daemonic beings such as she.

I replied:

Dear Monsieur Lagrange,

Please do not trouble yourself, and believe me when I tell you I am not offended in the slightest. I too would be delighted to continue our conversation at another time. For now though, I trust you will enjoy your soirée with Ms. Lewis. I should tell you Ms. Lewis and I were intimately acquainted for a while, and though we parted company some time ago, we are still on reassuringly good terms. I have no doubt you will find her company to be both charming and gracious.

Please pass on my kind regards to Madame Lafayette, and also to your daughter.

Yours sincerely

Richard Graves.

I handed the note to Lagrange in Reception and asked if he would see to it. Then, armed with waterproof coat and hat, I set out into the rain with the sole intention of losing myself in it.

Surely, I thought, Lafayette being such a lifetime student of literature could not be completely insensitive to the idea of the projected soul. She was the prototype for every female heroine, after all. How was it possible he had not yet made the acquaintance of his own soul, for surely she must have been tearing her hair out by now and dragging him into the depths of a personal hell for his neglect of her. But then he was not a writer. He was instead that most extraordinarily analytical of readers – the literary academic, and worse: the critic.

Is that why I both feared and pitied him? Feared him for his capacity to misunderstand and misinterpret me, and pitied him for his inability to connect with any creative spark of his own, any possibility of respite from the cold walls of his reductionist incarceration? He could not construct his own vision, his own bridge to the nether realms – only tut-tut at the shoddy workmanship of those who'd set out before him. Would he ever dare, I wondered, cross over himself? No. He was blind. Much as I respected him, he was too rational to hold any serious opinions on the true nature of reality, beyond clinging to a belief in the pointlessness of it all.

Who were his prototypes? His wife? His daughter? It was interesting that my own salvation had been born out of my resolve to release Gabrielle. Perhaps his might be won if he could only find a way of letting her go.

I turned initially towards the pavilion, but discovered I was feeling anything but romantic, so steered myself instead to the south where I followed the lake path into unfamiliar territory. I came eventually to a small, half-moon bay set between rocky promontories. Here, close to the rocks of the southern-most promontory there was a boat-house. I was surprised; I thought I knew the lake by now, having studied the map Lagrange had given me at some length, and there was no boathouse, but that had been another time, another map perhaps. I

took the map from my pocket now. It was crinkled with earlier soakings, fibrous holes beginning to appear at the intersections of the folds. It was surely the map Gabrielle and I had used to navigate our way that day on the mountain, the map that had found us the chalet and the paths back to La Maison? Possibly it was, but now it also indicated the boathouse. I had no choice then but to accept it. I eyed the disintegrating map in despair. It would not last much longer. And then how could I hope to find my way?

Built of dressed stone and partially hidden by trees, the boathouse had taken on the mossy and softly mouldered appearance of great age. More to the point however, and equally startling, was the fact it had an arched doorway, and there, sheltering in the deep shadowy recess of it, cold and wet and huddled in a thin dress and inadequate cardigan, was Gabrielle.

By now it was raining steadily and there was a chill breeze blowing in from the lake. Her dress clung to her breasts and her thighs, and she was shivering. As I approached she gave me a haunted look and for a moment I thought she might be about to run for it.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“Obviously it is not,” she replied.

I was thinking of the dream, wondering if she remembered it, wondering if that was why she looked so uncomfortable now, but then she said. “In case you haven't noticed, it is raining. I am cold and soaked to my knickers. And La Maison is still half an hour away!”

“Take my coat,.... please.”

I joined her in the shelter of the archway and took off my coat. She was reluctant to accept it at first, but I gave her no choice, dropping it firmly around her shoulders. The only way she could refuse was by struggling with me and she wasn't willing to go that far. She went rigid for a moment as the cloth touched her, but then she accepted it and the coat visibly melted around her as she took possession of it.

“Thank you,” she said, reluctantly.

“Is the door locked?”

“I don't know,... I didn't think to try. It felt like trespassing.”

I gave the handle a twist and the door yielded softly. We were met with darkness and a faintly musty, earthy smell - not unwholesome. There was a switch on the wall so I flicked it, and a strip of neon lamps came on revealing a motor cruiser, tugging gently at is moorings. It was the boat that had conveyed Samantha back to the island, last night. So, this is where it lived.

“Come in for a bit,” I said. “It's warmer in here.”

“Will we not get into trouble?”

“This place must belong to the hotel,” I reassured her. “We're guests. I'm sure Herr Gruber won't mind us taking shelter for a while.”

“It's all right for you. You seem on good terms with him – better than my parents any way. Some of the things they say to him, I cringe. I can hardly look at him without embarrassment.”

“Don't be silly, Gruber adores you.”

“What?”

“Don't look at me like that. You know he dotes on you.”

“No.”

“Did you know they keep a book of the names of difficult guests? It's true; Gruber told me himself: *There are certain guests for whom I prefer not to have vacancies, Mr Graves*.” She laughed at my attempt at Gruber's accent. “So,” I went on. “Why else do you think your parents are allowed to come here summer after summer? They are tolerated only in your company.”

She laughed. “Oh, please, Richard. How ridiculous!When I'm with them, I'm just a,... just a,...”

“Shadow?”

“Yes,... you've noticed that?”

“It's the only reason I noticed you at all. Now, come inside. It's all right.

Trust me.”

I followed a flight of steps that led up to a small room with shuttered windows and I opened them to reveal an elevated timbered deck overlooking the water. The room was comfortably furnished - some soft couches and a wood-burning stove. The stove had been laid ready for lighting with matches and tapers, and a basket of wood beside it.

Gabrielle was still nervous being there “Wait,.. what are you doing?”

“I'm getting a fire going. It's all right. It'll be warm in no time, and you need to get dry.”

She scowled at me then. “I'm not taking my clothes off, no matter how wet I am. And especially not in front of you.”

“I wasn't suggesting you took them off. Though that would be better of course.”

“In your dreams, *Monsieur*, I think.”

“Why not?” I teased: “You've done it before.” I smiled but she stood defiantly in the doorway and narrowed her eyes. As the fire took, I suggested she could put her clothes over a chair-back and draw it up to the fire. “You can wear my coat in the mean time. It's long enough to cover your knees. That's surely enough modesty for any woman. I'll go and stand outside if you like, while you change.”

She thought for a moment, still suspicious. “All right. But if we're caught, I'll leave you to do the explaining.”

“Caught? I don't think so. This looks more like a set-up to me.”

“Set up? A trap, you mean?”

“A kind of trap, yes. A bit,... second rate too. I would have preferred a more subtle scene than this, but I guess the daemons have no choice. We needed a rendezvous, somewhere far enough away from the hotel we wouldn't be seen, especially by your parents, and the pavilion would be too cold in the rain.”

“You're making no sense, Richard.”

“Don't you feel manipulated? Listen, how does this sound to: *The rain was cold, they found shelter in a cosy little room over a dreamy boathouse by the lake. They took their clothes off in order to dry them. They began to talk,... she melted a little – after all there was nothing quite so arousing as the sound of rain and the feel of wet bodies.*”

“It sounds corny,” she said. “If you made it up, I suggest you re-write it.”

“Yes,... however I don't think they care about literary sophistication, in the daemonic realms. Originality always comes second to the underlying meaning. And at a certain level all stories are derived from the mythic bedrock of the world soul anyway. After all, was it not your fellow countryman, Georges Polti who said there were only thirty six dramatic situations, thirty six stories, so to speak, in the whole world, and all the rest are derivative? They care more about what resonates in the daemonic realm you see,... and this,.... this resonates.”

“Richard, you over analyse, and you fantasise. It is cosy, yes, but it smells of wet dog, and I'm sorry but that does not put me in a mood for making love to you.”

“Ha! Good for you. Resist! You're right: we can make a better story than that, surely? It really smells of wet dog to you?”

“It doesn't to you?”

“No, something sweeter, surely? The firewood perhaps?”

She gave me a patient sigh. “Are you going outside or not?”

“Of course,... but I've seen you undressed before.”

“And I'm afraid that is all you're getting for now, because suddenly I'm thinking there's something very strange about you – I mean, any man who is turned on by the smell of wet dog is definitely leaking somewhere. And this George Polti? Who the hell is George Polti?”

But she was laughing as she said this, possibly even flirting a little. I took heart from it, then stepped out onto the deck. It was overhung by jutting eaves, all of it dark wood and sturdy in that inimical Swiss cottage style. I was able to look down from the rail, directly upon the waters of lake which now steamed and shimmered in the sluicing rain.

Eventually she came out and leaned upon the rail beside me.

“Your coat is a little big for me.”

“Nonsense. You'd look beautiful in anything.”

“If you say so. But I should warn you I don't respond to cheap compliments.”

“Then obviously I need to up my game.”

“I’d rather you didn’t trouble yourself,” she said. “I've found tea and milk and sugar. You're right: it's as if we we were expected.”

So we went back inside and made tea, then sat upon the couches at opposite sides of the fire, while Gabrielle's dress and bra and pants and cardigan steamed slowly dry between us.

“Did you send word to my father, like you promised?”

“There was no need. He cancelled the engagement himself this morning. Apparently you've all been invited to dine instead with Samantha Lewis this evening.”

“Who?”

“The actress? She's staying out at the annex. Your father's not said anything to you?”

“No.” She rolled her eyes in dismay. “It sounds dreadful. I am not good company. I always say the wrong thing. And I get nervous, which makes me sweat buckets. I wish they'd just accept I am socially inept and leave me alone, and not keep trying to improve me all the time.”

“Yes, that must be tiresome for you.”

“Is she a famous actress?”

“Yes.”

“You know her?”

“We were lovers for a while. Still friends, fortunately. I'm sure you'll like

her."

Her eyes opened wide. "You came to be with her? You are *together*? Richard, I cannot keep up with your liaisons. Yesterday is was Bernadette and now it is this famous actress?"

"No. I'd no idea she was coming. Really. It was a coincidence. It's impossible to explain, so I'm not even going to try, but believe me when I tell you I came to La Maison to be alone, entirely alone. I wanted to write something, a story,... *this* story. And now the only person I want to be with is the one I can't get near any more."

"Who?"

"Can you even ask me that? It's you of course. I can;t get near *you*."

"I distract you from your writing? I ruin your story?"

"No. You *are* my story. We are the last guests of La Maison Du Lac, remember? Oh, how I wish you could remember it."

"It all sounds very romantic, but I cannot be in your story, Richard."

"It's too late. You're already the central character."

"No. You do not know me. You are making things up, writing things about me that are not really true."

She was quiet for moment, lost, staring over the rim of her teacup as if into unfathomable depths, and then she said. "I dreamed about you last night, you know?"

"You did?"

She looked at me, trying to read something in my expression. "Oh,... don't get your hopes up. We didn't get up to much.. We were on the island of Ibiza, lounging on a beach, in the sun."

"We talked of Ibiza last night," I said, cautiously. "Don't you remember? It was perhaps the association. You talked about dancing on the beach and making love to a stranger, and I was rather hoping that stranger might be me."

I could have sworn she looked disappointed for a moment at my prosaic explanation for the content of her dream. “Yes, of course,” she said. “That's exactly what I thought. It was the association, that's all.” She looked at me, almost hopefully, though: “You didn't dream of it too, then? You didn't dream of me, with you, on a beach, on the island of Ibiza?”

Did she really believe such a thing was possible? What could I say? The truth would seem too much like I was making it all up. Before I could answer, she gave a dismissive shrug. “Of course not. It was silly of me. I just thought,...”

“What? That it might have been true?”

“As I said, it was a silly idea. Forget it.”

“But if it *had* been true? What then?”

“I was thinking, if was true,... then it's possible I may remember,... being someone else, once,... even of being fond of you. We came already with a history. Something we had shared, and I knew what it was then, but the dream took it all away when I woke up, and it troubles me now because I can't get it back. It’s like when you know you’ve forgotten something, but can’t for the life of you remember what it was. And you worry it’s important.”

How dangerous was this? Was it wise to seek to remind her of another life? What would happen to this life, to her present self? Would she be blotted out by the other? Or would the accommodation result in an enlarged, improved and at least partially healed version of herself,... if she could only remember the feel of herself from that time!

“Richard? What is it?”

“What if I told you you were wearing a yellow Bikini?”

She gasped. “Then you *did* dream of it?”

“How could I? It's impossible.”

“Of course. But still, you *did* dream of it?”

“Yes, I was there. You were on a lounger next to mine. I was wearing a

ridiculous pair of shorts and my legs were burning."

"And,... and you made a joke."

"And I handed you your wrap. We spoke briefly about La Casa. Then I rather stupidly closed my eyes for a moment, partly in disbelief, partly in relief at having this version of you back with me, and when I opened them again you were no longer there."

She set down her cup with a nervous clatter, then covered her mouth, the realisation of what we were discussing suddenly dawning on her. "What is this? What does it mean?"

"Don't be afraid, Gabrielle."

"Who are you? *What* are you?"

It hadn't worked. She was fixing only on the impossibility of it, her rational ego rejecting it. Rather than letting her feelings rise from the unconscious, her ego was stamping on them, making her afraid

"I told you,... we knew each other once. It was a slightly different version of things. But I lost you, and now,..."

"But it's crazy. I would never go with a man like,... I mean not with *you*."

"Oh,... thanks."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean it that way. I mean, you are not my usual type."

"Ah,... well,... that doesn't sound quite so bad, I suppose." I sighed. "The times were different, Gabrielle. They were extraordinary. Europe had collapsed. There'd been a natural disaster - a solar flare on top of the fall-out from this volcano. It created an electromagnetic pulse, you know? Everything with a microchip in it was suddenly useless. Can you imagine that? Computers, phones, cars? All gone. And we were trapped here, you and I, at La Maison. And I don't know how, but somehow it was *right* for us. We found ourselves, so much so that you once said to me, whatever else happened, we should pray we never found normality again."

"No,... it's too much. I can't believe this. You're crazy."

“You're right. Compared with this reality, it seems far-fetched. But you do have a memory of it somewhere, only you've forgotten.”

“No,... I have no memory of any of that. Only,... you were familiar to me.”

“Do you not remember? You said something; you remembered us crossing the lake by boat together.”

She thought for a moment. “Yes. You, me,... and Bernadette. But what has she to do with anything? It made no sense to me, though it seemed plausible in the dream. But dreams are like that aren't they? They are convincing liars? What did it mean to you, this crossing of the lake together?”

“It was the last time I saw you. We were consumed by something. We never made it to the shore. Reality turned itself inside out, and I woke up nearly a week earlier, to the moment we met, by the lake, and you pulling your dress over your head and swimming in the lake.”

She blushed. “Oh,... that. So,... you fell asleep by the lake one day and dreamed it all, then woke up and there I was and,... here we are now.”

“That's the logical explanation, but truly, after everything I've been through, this seems the stranger reality to me, which suggests, if anything, I'm dreaming now.”

“No, you seem real enough to me.”

“But I seemed real in the dream too? What happened Why did you leave me?”

“I was startled by it. I woke up. Believe me I tried to get back into it, if only for curiosity, but I couldn't. In fact I've lain awake since the small hours. just thinking about it. That’s why I came out here, to breathe and to think,... about it.”

“It was a pity you couldn't stay in the dream. I'd liked to have shown you the house.”

“You have a house there?”

“Not yet,.... and I was hoping it might be *our* house. But I'm sure you

would've a hated it, anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Too much of a bachelor pad.”

“Perhaps you prefer things that way?”

“No. I don't think I do, actually.” I smiled, trying not to spook her, yet painfully aware of how weird this all must have sounded. “Please don't worry about the dream. I’m sure it wasn't a premonition or anything like that.”

“No?”

“No,... you mustn't think of it in those terms. It was just,... just a possibility. There are, after after all, any number of ways things can work out between us, and they all exist somewhere. It's just that some outcomes are more likely than others.”

“And what is our most likely outcome?”

“I hesitate to say, in case I make it true.”

“Then tell me your best hope, rather than your worst fear.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I would like to know.”

“That I wake up in that house one day to find it enriched with your presence, rather than the pristine and rather barren wilderness it appears to be at the moment.”

She looked away. “Well,... as you said, it was not a premonition.”

“No. Just a way of thinking about things”

She shook her head. “When I saw you beside me, I felt,...”

“Yes?”

“Like I wanted to be with you. I felt,... comforted.”

“That's good. There's hope for us yet.”

“No,... no it isn't good. Not for you. Not for me. If you knew me, you would understand why I say this. Richard, I am a train wreck. I am all smudged mascara. I am like,...”

“Fucking Halloween?”

“Yes,.... how do you?....”

“You told me that once before, and I still don't believe you.”

“You will get tired of me very quickly.”

“You've told me that before as well. And I didn't believe that either.”

“Listen, if we shared a house, it would have to be a big one, so you could keep out of my way when I go over to the dark side.” She looked at the fire, lost herself in it for a while, and then she laughed. “Why does that not sound so bad to me? Perhaps it's true then. Perhaps we did know each other in another life, a past life? It does not feel strange, the thought of living with you, because we have already done it?“

“No,... we've not done it, but we were hoping to.”

She allowed me a tender look. “I think you are right: it is the wood. I can smell its sweetness now.”

“I told you.”

There was something in her expression, a flicker of her brows, and I thought I recognised it, though I couldn't place it exactly, could not pin-point it to a precise moment in time, it triggered such a rush of emotion, I visibly quivered. It was the look she gave me when she was aroused.

“I think you should take off your clothes, now,” she said.

“I'm all right. I'm not that wet, really,... not shivering. It was just someone stepping over my grave, you know?”

She nodded and fixed me with her eyes. “*Je connais bien. Mais,... em,...* I don't mean for you to dry yourself.”

She stood and unzipped the jacket half-way, gave all her weight to one leg so her thigh jutted, and its curvaceous loveliness had me thinking at once of what she was also clearly thinking of now.

“But Gabrielle, you said,...”

“Oh, Richard, haven't you realised by now I am too contrary to be understood, and I mean nothing that I say? If you can understand that one thing, then you will already know me better than anyone else. You said you expected me to skip out on you, without ever honouring my promises. Well, *Monsieur*, I will show you I can be trusted. Consider this a down-payment.”

“A what?”

“But we must hurry, there is not much time. Soon I will be missed,and they’ll come looking.”

I remembered that first time, by the pavilion, and the curious bargain we'd struck. There had been a magic to it, but this was different. She could so easily have said it meant nothing, that I had not to imagine it did, that it was only sex. Yet how I wanted her! I wanted to feel the tenderness of her touch, exactly as I remembered it, and maybe - just maybe - through touching, she would remember me.

She was still waiting for my answer. “Well?”

I nodded and felt ashamed at the mismatch in what this would mean – for me everything, for her apparently nothing beyond the satisfaction of her transient desires, and the misguided belief that I was so shallow I would indeed consider it as a down-payment. But things were not so hopeless; when I stood and began to work upon my belt, there was something gentle in the touch of her fingers as she came to help me – a touch of the old Gabrielle. And when she said softly: “Do you still think you will never tire of me?” I knew her coldness was a defence, born of long years of disappointment, something she threw up as a warning, yet something she hoped her men would have the sense to brush away and love her as fiercely as she wanted to be loved.

Well, all right, then.

Coming to her, I was clumsy, my hands shaking a little. The zip of her jacket snagged and we could not unfasten it. I was ready to sit back,

and to laugh at our struggles, but she was not smiling. Her expression was stern, desperate to be free. I felt then something of her passion and it thrilled me anew.

The jacket would not slip down over her hips, so I pulled it over her head, and when her hair settled back across her naked chest it was wild, and she was wild with her want, pulling me to the couch, even as I fumbled with my shirt. There she pushed me down into submission and clawed at my trousers until I was free, and without preamble, she took me in her mouth and slid me deep into her throat.

Let her take me, I thought. Let her empty me, then I could be more leisurely with her, and prove to her, at last, that I knew every inch of her precious skin, every subtle move, every subtle moan, every whimper of encouragement.

I came fast, exploded, and still she clung, drinking down the dregs of me. And then I felt myself slipping,... slipping away.

NO! PLEASE GOD. NOT NOW!

“Don't let me go,” I begged her. “Keep me. Keep me here with you. Keep me, Gabrielle. Don't let me go.”

She looked at me, not understanding, her lips glistening, a little candle of seed falling from her chin which she caught up with the back of her hand, then sucked it shamelessly clean.

“Richard?”

“I,...”

“Is this is down-payment enough, do you think?”

“Yes,... yes,...”

“And you will still take me with you?”

“Yes,... yes, oh,... God,... yes.”

Chapter 57

I trusted that to lose myself in her was the best in life any man might wish for. And for the first time in my life I made love without pause from noon till night, my attention rapt, so that it came as a surprise to find myself seated eventually at ease, my sex curled and dozing on my leg, a sliver of seed issuing upon my skin, beads of the same glistening upon Gabrielle's delicately crenellated folds.

Dusk had come on, and the air was cooler. I floated there, insensible, stunned by her beauty, by her presence, and in awe of her priceless neuroses, a miracle that had cut clean through the unwholesomeness of the world, and taught me that it was all right to feel, and to be this way.

She was unaware of me as she stared dreamily through the distant windows, into the deep well of herself. I watched her lashes beating slow time in harmony with the rise and fall of her breasts and I felt my heart swell with a mixture of joy and despair; joy that I could know such a moment as this, and despair that I would never truly know this woman, never experience enough of her, though we lived to be old and grey and gloriously tired.

Wait.

I'd been here before!

“Gabrielle?”

She stirred, then looked back at me, dreamily. What had happened here? Had I gone back *again*? Had I crossed back to that previous time, to the annexe, and to that remarkable night with Gabrielle. Was this another new beginning, but one in which at least she knew me? My hear swelled at the prospect, but even she was smiling at me, I sensed a difference here. And then she spoke.

“Hmn? Sorry, darling? Ah, you're awake. Welcome back. That was quite a ride, wasn't it. Pardon my French.”

“Samantha!”

Gabrielle had indeed morphed smoothly now into Samantha, and I regarded our nakedness anew,... the proud swell of her derrière, the pendulous swing of her breasts, and I drew back in alarm.

“It's all right,” she said, tenderly. “It's not quite how it looks. I've borrowed this moment from your past. I thought if anything could get you back here in one piece, this moment would do it.”

She pulled on a robe and slid from bed, then stood looking out through the windows. “No need to be so horrified, darling. It wouldn't be the first time we'd done it. And it's quite all right, you know – not illegal or anything – for a man and his soul to have carnal knowledge of one another. It just doesn't happen very often.”

“Em,.. that's all right then.”

“We've also each seen the other at their worst more times than I can count.”

“Fortunately, I have no memory of any of that – nor, I regret to say,... of the other.”

She laughed. “Oh, but you’re so sweet. Such a gentleman! It’s no wonder Gabrielle can’t resist you.”

So, I was back at the annexe. But was I physically there, or just dreaming it? And was there any difference?

“Gabrielle and me, just now,” I said. “Tell me it was real! And don't say something infuriatingly vague like *it's all real, darling*.”

“Do you want it to be real?”

“Of course, yes,...”

“Careful now,” she warned. “Think about the consequences.”

“Yes, I want it to be real. And *hang* the fucking consequences.”

“That's the spirit. All right then. Let it be real. Of course it was real, though I'm afraid as far as Gabrielle's favours are concerned, a little fellatio is your limit for now.”

“Oh?... “

“It was tenderly meant though, and I think you can draw comfort from that.”

I sat up groggily, like one awakened too soon. “What happened there?”

“Since we’re slightly out of time here, darling, it might be better to speak in the present tense,” she corrected me. “From Gabrielle's perspective you're so overcome, you fall asleep, which surprises her a little, but also boosts her confidence, that she can still do that to a man. Then she holds you to her breast for a while, which is very touching, and when you show no signs of waking, she covers you and watches you. Then, growing bored, she wonders about waking you and goading you into having your way with her, but she decides against it and sneaks off in order to think about it all: I mean, making love to you, and then that queer dream that's been haunting her,... and I think we're close to a breakthrough there, Richard. I'm sure I can guide her back to you. It's just a question of finding the right words, the right circumstances, though what that will mean is anyone's guess, and we're going to have to be very careful. Meanwhile, from *your* perspective,... well, it doesn't take much for us to weigh anchor these days, does it, and an orgasm like like would certainly do it. Perhaps it's true what they say, that there are certain skills in the bedroom arts that only French girls know, but Gabrielle can certainly blow your mind,... if you'll pardon the pun.”

“Can't you let me go back? Let me wake up with her, let me feel myself against her, let me hear the beating of her heart.”

“It's done now, darling. It's set. Oh, I'm sure we could back up a few thousand words and try another re-write, but I fear it might take us too far away from this moment for it to mean anything. All of these little threads we've travelled, they seem so significant now, don't you think? Anyway, I'm sure you'll get another chance.”

“You think?”

“Tonight, possibly. If we play our cards right.”

“Tonight?”

“Have you forgotten? We're meeting the Lafayettes for dinner?”

“Oh,... that. I,... I wasn't sure I was invited.”

“Well of course you are. That was the whole point.”

“Really, I'd rather not go, if it's all the same.”

“But you're my guest of honour. You and Gabrielle, though we'll have to keep quiet about that and pretend it's Monsieur and Madame who are the honoured guests.”

“Gabrielle won't come.”

“I think she will.”

“Why?”

“Because I've sent word that you'll be there too.”

“You don't understand, Samantha; that's exactly what she *didn't* want.”

“But that was before, darling.”

“Before what?”

“Well, what do you think? Oh, she'll be nervous, and out of sorts, poor darling,... but also tingling with excitement and still haunted by your naughty little assignation in the boathouse. So you must be a gentleman and put her at ease. But whatever you do, you must be at that table, Richard. You and Gabrielle.”

“I really don't see the point.”

She sighed impatiently. “The point, is this,” she said. “Everything's been coming to this, to this one night, when you finally sit a table, face to face with Madame and Monsieur Lafayette. And things are never what they seem here, are they? Sometimes they're less, sometimes more. On this occasion, dinner is merely the excuse. The point is the discussion that will take place between us.”

“To discuss what?”

“The terms of Gabrielle's release of course.”

“You make it sound like a negotiation.”

“Well, that’s exactly what it is. And you must be fearless, darling. You must know exactly what it is that you want, and you must accept no compromises.”

Chaptetr 58

There were coloured lights burning upon the lawns of La Maison. I saw them as we crossed the lake in the cruiser, its engine purring, its timbers gleaming as we carved out a pale white line upon the black water, a projection from the centre of myself to whatever lay in store for us on the other shore of reality. Gunther had come for us, and he steered now, a peculiar apparition in a dark suit and white gloves, like a butler.

As usual he said nothing, never once turning to look at us while we rode in the back. The sparkle and the shine of him, so far removed from his old grizzled self, had me on edge. This was not a little soiree at all. It was a gala evening, possibly a once in a life-time event, and already the formality of it, the sense of an end, an impending conclusion, and a profound transformation, made me fearful.

I heard music drifting on the night air – an old time samba – and in the distance, on the shore, couples were dancing. I saw long dresses and dinner jackets idling by the jetty. Surely they were not guests? The hotel had been emptying these past days. Were they rank upon rank of daemons then, come from corners of imagination, far and wide, to gather and bear witness?

She wore the black and white polka dot dress and she'd loaned me a dinner jacket that she'd said was mine, otherwise it would not have fit so well, and suddenly I was crossing the water of the lake, dressed as I had once dressed before, only this time in the company of a less disguised version of my soul.

“You see how they look at you, Richard?”

“No, it's you they're looking at.”

“Then perhaps, through me, they see something new in you?”

“No. I think they see only what they want to see, or rather what they want to be.”

“Oh, tell me?”

“The women want to be you. The men want to be with you in my place. But it's you who stirs them. Not me.”

“And what is it that you do, Richard?”

“Me? I'm just a writer, a recorder. I observe, and write it all down.”

“Why?”

“Because I have no choice. I'm a slave to my muse. That's all. You know that.”

She snuggled a little closer. “Don't underestimate your importance in the scheme of things,” she said. “And remember what I told you: the dead do not know how to live, except through you.” She took my arm, then offered me a small box, bound with a red bow. “A gift,” she said.

Curious, I opened it to find Gruber’s watch. I looked at her, even more fearful now. “Are we so close?”

“Yes, darling. We're very close to the end now.”

“But does it have to be tonight? I don't feel ready. ”

“Of course you're ready. Remember also that no matter how this works out, I'm always with you – even when you cannot see me.”

“Are you saying I won't see you again, after tonight?”

“It’s a miracle you can see me at all. But you’re right. You already know what it means, to give Gruber back his watch. It draws a line. It tells the daemons to step back, and me with them, I’m afraid. The next time we meet, after tonight, I may not appear to know you quite so well as I do now. Except in your dreams of course.”

“I,... I'm not sure I can survive here for long without you. I need you, Samantha.”

“You don't have to survive for much longer, darling. Just tonight. Then you'll be fine.”

“Any last words of advice?”

She gave me a smile, sweet, reassuring. “You already know what it is you want, Richard. Tonight's the night you find the courage to finally take it.”

Heinrich was waiting to secure the lines, and to offer Samantha his hand. Then Gruber was strolling towards us, his arms outstretched, beaming, a gesture of warmth and bonhomie. He was wearing his whitest suit and his most rakish Fedora, something theatrical about him, indeed about the whole evening, and it reminded me of that first vision, that first loosening of my grip on what I believed to be the nature of reality.

“How lovely to see you both,” he said. “I trust you're finding things comfortable on the island, Ms. Lewis?” He offered Samantha his arm which she took readily as if they knew each other very well, and they began to walk together, like a pair of actors hamming it up for an audience.

“It's simply perfect, as always, Herr Gruber,” I heard her say.

“And how is your story progressing, Mr. Graves?”

“Oh,... it twists and turns, Herr Gruber. Nearing a climax, now, I think.”

“But will it be a happy or an unhappy ending?”

“Let's just say I'm still hoping to avert a tragedy.”

“I trust you will succeed. It may be the romantic in me, but I find there's always something false, something dissatisfying, even insulting, in an unhappy ending. The reader has been dragged along, dragged through hell even, patiently awaiting the lifting of all barriers, only to reach the final page in order to witness his hero's ignominious failure.”

“But if there's no answer to the problems we're set, Herr Gruber, then

failure is the only likely outcome."

"Then it is the writer's duty to ask the right questions in the first place. Only a child will ask unanswerable questions."

"There's such a thing as an heroic failure, though?"

He gave a wistful sigh. "I suppose so,... and yet I do so prefer an unambiguously optimistic conclusion. Tragedy and pointlessness are the denouements of the rational philosophies, and I did not take you for a rational philosopher, Mr Graves. There is something more of the mystery school in you, something of the old world. You are a Romantic, a disciple of Mercurius, perhaps? You know, the messenger of the Gods,and the master alchemist?"

"But surely a timely tragedy can act as a warning, Herr Gruber? It says: look how bad things will turn out if you're not careful."

"The carrot, or the stick, Mr. Graves? Repression or encouragement? Surely the negative approach is a little,... outdated, a little Victorian? When you raise children, I find they respond better to reward than to punishment."

"Then I'll see what I can do, but I must warn you my story at the moment is in the hands of the gods, and if Mercurius is indeed the deity in question, then I'm busy imploring him to intervene on my behalf."

"And that's no bad thing, Mr. Graves. But tell me: did you settle on a title?"

"It will be *The Last Guests of La Maison Du Lac*,..."

"I'm not sure I like *the last guests,* you know? It implies an end. That there won't be any more guests. And I'd like to think my doors will always be open, that I will be immortalised. And you did say you would immortalise me, didn't you?"

"I did, didn't I? I remember that, though I also remember it wasn't strictly speaking in this version of reality at all."

He laughed agreeably, as if at my joke, but he knew well enough what I meant. There was nothing Gruber did not know.

“But Herr Gruber,” said Samantha. “Do you not close La Maison every year at the ending of the summer season? Before the snows come?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle. It is a little ritual of ours.”

“Then every year there must be some *last guests* – perhaps that's what Richard is getting at. As for your immortality, surely you do not need to be reminded of it. Richard's story *will* be finished and you will have your immortality in it as much as any of us.”

Gruber remained unconvinced, his brow furrowing with concern. “Still,...” he said. “How about calling it simply Maison du Lac? What do you say Ms Lewis?”

Samantha wrinkled her nose. “House on the Lake? But your house is so much more than a house, Herr Gruber. So many more rooms than an ordinary house, wouldn't you say?”

“Well,... yes,...”

“Indeed, I'd go further and say it has so many rooms, it's sometimes difficult to find one's way around it. It looks so homely, so modest, so welcoming but few can imagine the secrets it holds, while fewer still will ever escape its labyrinth once they fall into it.”

“But you make it sound like a trap. Yet all are willing who come here. And they leave refreshed.”

“And they always return. Look at poor Richard here, and the Lafayettes, and the De Luca's. You do something to them Herr Gruber. You are the perfect hotelier, but La Maison is like a drug, and no matter how far and wide your guests may wander, they must always be returning to it. And I suspect in the case of Richard here, and Gabrielle, they will always be the last to leave it when the season turns, if for no other reason than they crave the strangeness of the thoughts it inspires in them.”

A large square of lawn had been marked out with coloured lights which twinkled, dispersing the night-time shadows, and lending a seductive mood to the scene. The dining room had been remodelled; one wall was comprised entirely of French doors now, where it had been solid before, and the doors had been thrown open to connect the diners within to the dancers without. There was a busy but relaxed air, the

rhythm of the music intoxicating. Samantha's hips were beginning to gyrate, a movement amplified by her dress. Gruber picked up on it, his eyes twinkling with delight, his steps falling into the same rhythm. And that was how they progressed; half dancing, half walking.

I let them go on ahead, pausing to take one more look at the night and to savour the feel of the air. It was extraordinary, yet there was no consistency here. The scenery, the weather, even the season shifted to match whatever one's mood desired. Yesterday at this time I had sat out to watch the setting sun, yet now it was already dark, the milky way smudged over my head, the brighter stars twinkling. Autumn, end of season, was approaching, the conclusion of my story looming.

As we crossed the threshold of the dining room Gruber turned to me, confidentially. “I had no idea you were so well acquainted with Ms. Lewis.” he said. “Her coming was by no means certain, but I'm glad you were able to meet up again.”

“Oh? Thank you. Yes, we're old friends.”

“And clearly her presence gives you courage, but you won't let her distract you from your purpose, I hope?”

“My purpose? Ah,... no. There's no danger of that. Indeed she seems every bit as determined I succeed in this as you are yourself, Herr Gruber.”

“Splendid.” And then as we caught up once more with Samantha, he said: “I've taken the liberty of arranging for you all to be seated in the alcove, at my own table.”

“In exchange for an invitation, darling?” Samantha observed, pointedly.

Gruber dismissed her teasing with a wiggle of his fingers. “Naturally, Ms. Lewis. But then I know how much you treasure my company.”

“How true, Herr Gruber. Your charm knows no bounds, and we all find it totally irresistible. But you understand the importance of this evening? For Richard, and for Gabrielle?”

He gave her a look as if to say she need not ask, so she smiled, satisfied, then invited him to take her arm once more.

We met the Lafayettes in the dining room, Monsieur looking prickly and glum at having his evening hijacked, Madame a little puffed up and over-fragrant, and speaking the most perfect English for Samantha's benefit. It was then with a queer mixture of dismay and delight I discovered Gabrielle had not made an excuse. She stood shadow-like at the back, determined not to catch my eye.

She wore her dowdiest frock, and her hair was carelessly tangled, as if she'd just got out of bed – indeed the crease that ran down her cheek, suggested exactly that. She was an insubstantial shade beside Samantha's brightness. Samantha knew it, and shone all the brighter on purpose, presumably so I would resent her for it, and therefore emphasise all the more how fundamentally I was drawn to Gabrielle. She was reminding me of my duty to rescue her, even if I did not love this version of my muse.

Or did I?

Looking at her now, I realised she was not a different woman to the one I'd known before at all. She was the same, only caught up in a different version of her life. But her vital essence, the twist of psyche that was essentially *Gabrielle* was unique, and timeless, and immortal,... and it was this I loved. Sometimes we mistake our projections for love. But love is love, and always recognises its own face.

Bernadette gave a twinkle and a curtsey, then led us to our table. We made a grand party – Gruber and Samantha, like the King and Queen at our head, the Lafayettes like Duke and Duchess following in their wake, and the eyes of the whole room upon them. Meanwhile Gabrielle and I, poor hangers on, yet for ourselves the very centre of things, made a play for the rear. It brought us close enough to each other for her to flash daggers at me, and to whisper harshly into my ear, so that I felt the heat of her breath: “You said you weren't together, you and this,... this,... Samantha.”

“We're not. I told you, we're old friends.”

“I saw you arrive in that boat. You looked very much *together* to me. Very cosy, in fact!”

“I,... spent the afternoon with her.”

“Why?”

“She invited me. And you,... you deserted me.”

“Because you fell asleep on me. *Imbecile!”*

“I'm sorry. That was impolite. But I assure you, once I get a tighter grip on things, it will never happen again.”

“The making love? Or the falling asleep?”

“The latter, obviously. Of the former I could never tire.”

She allowed me a smile. “Have I not warned you about showering me with cheap praise?”

“You have. And I remember I also promised to up my game.”

“Well,... I forgive you,... for falling asleep. Actually it was very touching.” She sighed, then squared her shoulders as if preparing to push something very heavy up-hill. “Oh, Richard, this is going to be dreadful,” she said. “My father is in a terrible mood. He thinks Gruber is a pompous ass.”

“I think the feeling's mutual, but if it's any comfort, I believe there are only two people in this room tonight who are in any way real. Perhaps we should focus on them, and we'll both get through it somehow.”

“Do you face every crisis by talking nonsense this way?”

“You'd need to read the book to make any sense of it I'm afraid, though 'sense' is hardly the best word here – maybe some form of abstract understanding at best.”

She wasn't listening and her steps had begun to falter. “Actually, I think I'm going to faint,” she said.

“What? Take my arm.” And when she hesitated, I said: “Don't worry. Your parents will assume I'm with Samantha. If they see you and me together like this they'll think I'm simply being gallant, escorting you to our table. Perhaps my manners will even impress them.”

“I can't do it, Richard. It seems so hot and noisy in here. Don't you

think it's hot?”

“Yes. It's very hot. Would you like some air?”

She'd stopped now. Her hands were trembling, her neck becoming red and blotchy, her brow moist. “My legs are shaking. I can't move. Not another step.”

“It sounds like you're having a panic attack.”

“Well of course I am. I told you what I was like. I warned you! What do I do?”

“Let’s just hang back for a bit. If you need some time outside, I’ll come with you. We can send word with one of the staff.”

The others had sat down by now, a cosy foursome – Madame Lafayette already beaming and hungry for Samantha's radiance. Her husband was controlling his displeasure as best he could, but it looked as if Samantha might be capable of winning him round as he too began to beam at her, stiffly at first, but warming by degrees. Gruber observed them with a calm detachment. Meanwhile the empty chairs awaited us. They were positioned next to one another. Gruber to the left, Samantha to the right.

It had the look of a council of war.

“We'll be sitting together,” I said.

“And this is supposed to make all the difference?”

“Perhaps not. What shall we do?”

“Have you got your car-keys?”

“You're thinking we should run? I admit the thought appeals to me, but something tells me we're better facing this, if we can.”

“What? Richard, you don't understand; I can't sit at a table with,... *her*,... she looks like a movie star.”

“She *is* a movie star. Remember?

“Oh,.. of course, but,... *merde*! And here I am looking like, like I'm,...”

“Dragged through a hedge backwards?” I suggested.

She managed a smile, and a shy nod. “You were once the lover of this woman?”

“Apparently, at least in this version of reality – yet curiously she's preventing me from remembering the best bits. Sorry,... that'll all sound like nonsense. You'll,...”

“I know. *I'll have to read the book*.”

“Who knows what she’ll be to me tomorrow. A stranger, possibly. We'd better enjoy her company while we can.”

“You intend to win her back?”

“No, I didn’t mean it that way. Today we’re former lovers, old friends. Tomorrow, who knows. It all depends where I wake up.”

“And in whose bed?”

“Again, I didn't mean it that way. But since you brought it up, if I don’t wake up in yours, Gabrielle, then I trust I shall remain for ever alone, because no other woman can come close making me feel the way I feel for you.”

She laughed at my audacity, but also blushed appealingly. “Ah, Richard, you're very kind, but I'm sure I will always be such a poor second, next to her.”

“And if only I could remember, then I would have something to compare you with. But your radiance, Gabrielle, blots out my memory of all other times and places.”

“Oh,... but you're so full of shit.” She smiled. “However, all the same, I think I like you.”

“You do? Then it’s a start.”

“Yes. A start. My panic attack,... it's passing, now. I feel a little better. You are good for me, it seems.”

“Take your time. Samantha dazzles them on purpose, so they won't notice us.”

She hooked her hand through my arm and nodded. “I'm all right.” She took a deep breath and steeled herself. “I shall think of how I felt when I dreamed of lying beside you on that beach.”

“And I shall try to imagine what it might have been like to feel my head against your breasts, as you held me in the boat house, this morning.”

“Richard,... how did you?... All right, all right: I'll have to read that damned book of yours.”

“Not mine, Gabrielle. Ours.”

So, we finally made our entrance, just as the others had begun to miss us, and we took our places as they looked up, Anton materialising to perform his duties with Gabrielle's chair. I was feeling buoyant, basking in the pleasure I had evidently given Gabrielle, and in the thought that she believed I might even be good for her. The evening seemed to be off to a promising start, but Madame rounded on Gabrielle, and at once the atmosphere became frosty.

“You are unwell?” she said, and implicit in her tone were the unspoken words: *“Even now you can think of embarrassing us?”* though the only one causing embarrassment of course was Madame Lafayette.

Gabrielle made a deliberate effort to straighten herself, her frame gradually and impressively filling her dress so that it no longer seemed so dowdy, her breasts becoming erect and proud. “I'm perfectly well, Maman, thank you. Richard and I were admiring the view of the lawn. Is that not so, Richard? How pretty the lights are.”

There was a sudden energy in her voice, a composure, a confidence that I'm sure her mother read as insolence. Nor, I’m sure, did she fail to notice Gabrielle's familiarity with me, calling me Richard, and not Monsieur Graves. We were definitely tu, and not vous, and I'm sure madame was wondering about that.

“Yes,” I said. “A lovely view to be sure. Herr Gruber, you do us proud, as always.”

“Thank you Mr. Graves.” Gruber turned to Gabrielle, then made so

bold as to take her hand and, with an endearing twinkle, he said: “If I may say so, Mademoiselle, you look more beautiful with each passing year.“

Gabrielle sighed patiently. “And if I may say so, Herr Gruber, you are a liar, but also very charming.”

And we all laughed, including the Lafayettes - Monsieur through clenched teeth, Madame with more abandon, but only because Samantha appeared to be so charmed, and Madame was keen to appear charmed by Samantha.

Samantha smiled fondly at Gruber. “Oh, he's such a rogue, Gabrielle, but so lovely, don't you think? We're fortunate to have such a host, I think.”

Gabrielle looked at her, felt a peculiar kinship, something that surprised her, and then she nodded in slow understanding.

Meanwhile, the Lafayettes appeared odd sitting side by side, curiously diminished without Gabrielle between them. It was as if we'd kidnapped her, hauled her to the opposite side of the table and placed her in our protective midst. What now? Were we really to discuss our terms? I think Madame sensed it, and proved at once how adept a negotiator she could be.

Conversation had begun, innocently enough, with talk of the volcano, the reported extent of the dust cloud, rumours of which airports would be reopening, which flights would be the first to leave Zurich. And then, just as we felt comfortable enough to relax, Madame played her opening cards, announcing triumphantly that she’d secured tickets to Paris by train, that they would be leaving in the morning.

Although disappointed to be cutting short her stay, she would be pleased to depart, she said, with memories of such a fine evening, and such splendid company. She was sorry, she said, they could not stay any longer, but with no guarantee of flights at the end of the week, they had little choice.

Gabrielle drew breath. “You said nothing to me about this, Maman?”

“I've only just had confirmation, Gabrielle.”

“But,... I am not ready to leave. It feels like we have only just arrived.”

I was quietly considering our options now. This was unexpected, but hardly a disaster. If the Lafayettes were indeed to leave tomorrow, then Gabrielle and I would have to sneak away tomorrow as well. But there was something desperate in her expression and I sensed she had no intentions of leaving before Saturday. I was glad for that because suddenly the idea of sneaking anywhere had begun to feel wrong, even dishonourable – if such a word could be said to exist these days. If I wanted her, surely the thing to do was take her, but tell her parents beforehand that this was my intention. Things were different here, after all.

“We can discuss this later Maman,” said Gabrielle, ”but I shall be staying, I think.”

Her father rounded on her suddenly. “It is out of the question, Gabrielle. You know how fragile you are just now.”

“Later, Papa,... let us not spoil the evening with our squabbles. And really, as you know, I am perfectly well.”

The Lafayettes exchanged glances, Madame looking suitably horrified, but sufficiently conscious of Samantha's celebrated presence not to go too far in making a scene. “How will you get home?” she said. “You will never find your way alone.” She tried to cover it but I think we all winced at the venom in her voice.

“I can always lend you Richard,” said Samantha. “He could drive Gabrielle home. You’ll be going that way, on Saturday, won’t you? I mean through *France*.”

“Em,... I will? I mean,... I *will. Of course. It’ll be my pleasure.”*

Gabrielle smiled indulgently, then placed her hand on top of mine. It was unexpected and I did well not to flinch. The Lafayettes' eyes homed in on our apparent union, their brows furrowing in suspicion and alarm. “That's sweet of you, Richard,” she said. “But, really I don’t think I'm ready to go home. On Saturday, I think I would like to move on somewhere else, possibly even visit,... oh,... I don't know,... Ibiza?”

Monsieur Lafayette was less than impressed. “Ibiza!” he spat.

Unruffled, Gabrielle replied: “Yes, Papa.”

Then he remembered himself in Samantha’s presence, and smiled at his daughter as one might at a child who had just asked for leave to visit the moon. “But why Ibiza, my dear?”

She shrugged innocently. “Because,... I have never been before?”

His eyes scanned the assembled company looking, I think, to garner sympathy for his plight at having a so sadly afflicted daughter - insane enough at thirty two to want to go her own way. “But,.. Gabrielle,” he pleaded. “Ibiza is hardly *our* sort of place. There is,... promiscuity and drug taking,... and all manner of,...”

Herr Gruber was affronted and cut in. “Oh,... I really must beg to differ, Monsieur. I have an hotel on the island and it is in the most charmingly tranquil place. I grant you some of the larger tourist centres are famed for their, em,... somewhat boisterous revelry, but,... at La Casa, and many other resorts the atmosphere is,... ”

But Gabrielle’s father wasn’t interested in Gruber’s assurances, and cut him off, addressing Gabrielle directly: “We are not leaving you here alone. It is out of the question. Now, we shall say no more about it.”

I felt Samantha's elbow jabbing mine, and when I looked at her, her brows were raised as if I'd forgotten something and she was trying to remind me. But remind me of what?

“This is such a coincidence, Richard,” she gushed, beaming at me with false surprise.

“It is?”

“Were you not saying to me only this afternoon how you might change your plans and travel to Ibiza instead?”

No, not that, Samantha. *Please God. Let things settle, like her father wants. There’s no need to unpick the whole damned mess right now.*

“I,... I was considering it,...” I said, weakly.

“Surely, you were more than considering it, Mr. Graves,” said Gruber. “Lagrange informs me you have even booked rooms at the Casa,... for

which I must thank you. I'm sure you'll find it every bit as charming as La Maison, and if you don't I shall want to know about it, and shall refund you the bill."

Gabrielle's father looked daggers at me. "Is this true?"

"Em,... yes,... Monsieur." I shrugged helplessly, feeling like a cork rolling between the two mighty psychical waves of Gruber and Samantha. "It's just a provisional booking,..." I added lamely

"I'm sure," said Gruber, "There are other rooms available if Mademoiselle was serious about visiting the island. And I can think of no finer, nor more trustworthy a companion than Mr. Graves. I shall speak with Lagrange after dinner."

To my mind, however, it was all beginning to unravel. The Lafayettes clearly suspected a conspiracy. We'd been seeing each other behind their backs, and me pretending innocence all the while. Gabrielle was right. They would be watching her now, making any hope of a dignified – meaning secret - escape impossible. I was expecting her to deflate,... dreading it in fact, the loss of her stature, but something kept her upright, and I wondered about that.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur," I said, addressing Lafayette. "We would have to discuss it of course."

"But what's the matter Richard?" taunted Gabrielle. "Are you worried about your reputation?"

"Not mine, Gabrielle, but yours. As is your father."

She smiled. "Oh,.. but you English, you are so,... *nineteenth century*."

Any moment now Madame would be sliding to her feet, and withdrawing, complaining of a headache and insisting Gabrielle accompanied her. And Monsieur? He'd grown a deeper shade of red, and would not be long in forgetting his manners. But is this all we feared? A *scene*? What could they do? Threaten to send Gabrielle to her room? It was maddening, and pointless. If they could not be persuaded to give Gabrielle their blessing, then she would be leaving without it. Except their compliance was *everything*, and always had been. They were a neurosis, and could not be suppressed. They had to be dissolved. They had to be willing partners in our denouement, or

nothing would be properly resolved.

With perfect timing, Anton and Bernadette arrived to hand out the menus and everyone hid behind them for a moment, hoping to let the atmosphere blow over. End of round one, I was thinking. And there at the bottom of the list of La Maison's culinary delights, I spotted my Lotus leaf salad. I turned to Gruber, to find his eyes were already upon me, a smile animating his lips.

“Very funny,” I said.

“You don't fancy it? I'm told it is delicious. Monsieur, Madame,... can I recommend a little speciality of La Maison?”

But they were not to be persuaded. Madame did not like the sound of it, and her husband felt sure he would be allergic. I don't know if Gruber was joking, or if he'd actually spirited up some of the stuff. If he had, it was a pity they did not choose it; I would have liked nothing better than to have them suddenly overcome with a sleepy indolence. Alas though, it was not to be.

Orders were taken, the menus collected, and we faced each other again, the gentlemen sweating under their collars, the ladies fanning themselves with the wine-lists, which we'd managed to retain. Small-talk was now of the movies, of Samantha's last role, then of the Grantley Mysteries, a discussion I was reluctant to join, not from modesty, but because I did not know which version of things was correct; the movie or the TV series. Instead, I tried to steer the conversation in Gabrielle's fathers' direction by talking of Proust, and he looked hopeful for a moment, looking to catch my deftly tossed ball, but it was too highbrow a subject for the dinner table and fell uncomfortably flat, so we returned to the subject of the volcano. Then Gruber, mentioned my doomsday scenario of an interaction with a solar flare and everyone laughed and agreed it was too far fetched.

Then dinner arrived, and we began to eat, the conversation continuing to circle, apparently good naturedly once more, but it was a sham, the tensions barely submerged. And I was forever conscious of the pointed glances Gabrielle and I were getting now from Madame Lafayette.

“You have splashed gravy on your sleeve, Gabrielle,” she observed.

“Thank you for pointing that out Maman. Richard, would you pour me a

little water, please?”

“Of course.”

“Are you hot?” said Madame. “There is perspiration on your forehead and your hair is damp. You are not feeling unwell again, I hope?”

“Come to think of it, Maman I do feel a little strange. And my throat is dry.” She patted her chest and gave me a mischievous twinkle. “It was probably something I swallowed, earlier. What do you think, Richard?”

I managed to avoid spluttering back my wine. “It's possible, Mademoiselle. But whatever it was, I trust it wasn't too unpalatable for you?”

She laughed. “On the contrary. But please, you must call me Gabrielle – after all people who have seen each other n,...”

“It will be my pleasure, Gabrielle,” I interrupted her. She gave me an approving look, followed by one of amusement that we seemed to be so much in tune, that our humours, normally sunk in a leaden quagmire, could suddenly spark off each other.

“I'd no idea something like that could taste so good,” she went on. “Indeed, I find it has left me with quite an appetite for more of the same.”

Samantha couldn't resist: “But, Gabrielle, whatever was this marvellous delicacy? Nothing illegal, I hope?”

“Not at all. It's perfectly legal and entirely natural, so natural I wonder why I've hesitated to try it for so long.”

“But such a thing,... surely you're not going to keep it to yourself. It sounds as if I should try some myself.”

“I believe you already have, Ms. Lewis. More to the point, if you were hoping to try it again, I think I should like to know, because of this particular delicacy there is no possibility of sharing it – not even between the best of friends. Not even between the closest of sisters.” And with that she looked from Samantha to me.

“But darling,” said Samantha. “You can rest assured I'm not going to

stand in your way. We are sisters in more ways than you can imagine. Also,... if I might say,... perhaps you're not quite the stranger to it you think you are."

The lightness of our banter was arrested suddenly by the look in Gabrielle's eye, and I knew she was thinking again of the dream, remembering something, something that had haunted her since the small hours, but which she'd been unable to bring into the light. Until now. Meanwhile, Madame was puzzled, thinking perhaps Gabrielle was about to break down into a fit of unintelligible jabbering, except both Samantha and I appeared to understand her.

"Whatever are you talking about?" she asked.

Gabrielle made no reply. Instead, she retreated deep inside of herself, stretched her fingers out upon the tablecloth and gazed down at them.

Lost.

She'd also grown very pale. Even the blood in her lips had drained away to leave them white and waxy. The table had fallen into silence, and we all looked at her. She wore an amethyst dress ring on her right hand. I watched her slide it off and place it on the third finger of her left hand.

Then she looked up at me, and I knew,...

That she knew.

"Richard?" she said. "My God,..."

Chapter 59

Even as my heart leaped at the prospect of what I suppose I must call our psychical reunion, and before I could speak to Gabrielle, I was distracted by the sound of a chair being pushed back. It was a sound I remembered from a vision long ago, so when I saw Madame Lafayette standing and drawing something from her handbag, I was already expecting her to point the pistol at me.

I would have leaped aside in alarm, because I did not want catapulting out of this reality - I had found Gabrielle again at last, and would not let her go for anything - but Samantha steadied me with a hand on my shoulder, telling me things were not as they seemed, and in the end it was her compact that Madame withdrew. She clicked it open and checked her appearance, then with a grave expression, she said: “You will dance with me, Monsieur.”

It did not sound like a request.

At first I was adamant that I would not go, thinking it was impossible I could leave Gabrielle now, but Gabrielle was smiling, filling slowly with the recognition of her former self, and of the journey we'd already made together. It was she who eventually patted my hand. Her colour was returning, swelling her with a renewed confidence.

“Go,” she said. “All is well.”

So I rose and I led Madame out onto the lawn. There, she took my hand and we began to dance. Her palm was curiously warm – I'd expected something cold and lizard-like - and her hip was unexpectedly round and well shaped for dancing.

It was a quickstep; jolly, bouncy and totally inappropriate of course - given the mood of the evening - and it reminded me the universe was not without a sense of humour.

“There is something going on between you and my daughter, Mr. Graves?” she asked.

And I replied: “Yes, Madame.”

I felt her grip on my hand tighten a fraction, but she controlled it and relaxed once more. The negotiations were swinging away from her. She felt it, and was about to play her trump card. I felt it coming, but I also felt myself carried along on a wave of euphoria - that Gabrielle knew me, truly knew me now - and I was certain there was nothing her mother could say that would stand in our way.

“She is not like other women, you know?”

“That much is obvious, Madame.”

“You misunderstand. She is not well.”

“Clearly, she's sensitive in some ways, but I'd hesitate to say she was unwell. Indeed, we're very much alike, she and I. We have both lived in dark places.”

“You are not the man to control her. She will be the ruin of you.”

“I have no desire to control her, Madame. And I would consider it a privilege to be ruined by Gabrielle.”

She sighed impatiently, unimpressed by my romantic hyperbole. “What are your intentions, exactly?”

“Exactly? I don’t know, other than that I must release her from your protection, and into mine.”

She gasped at my cheek. “And why would you want to do such a thing?”

“Because I'm in love with her, and I want to set her free.”

“Free? Gabrielle can never be free. She is like an exotic little bird. She would not last long in the wild. She would not know even how to feed herself.”

“I disagree. In the short time I’ve known her I’ve found her to be brave and resourceful – as I'm sure you are, Madame.”

“Pah! You do not know her at all.” She looked at me closely, reading something, and then she said. “You don’t like me very much, do you, Mr Graves?” It was a statement of fact, and her tone betrayed how

little she cared whether I liked her or not.

“I find it hard to know you at all, Madame. You frighten me, but that's just your manner and I'd like to believe you don't mean it. I'd search for a more tender side to you, except you hide it so well - better than your husband, whom I’ve come to admire.”

“Ah, yes. Jean-Luc was always too sympathetic for his own good,” she said. Then she surprised me by looking wistful for a moment. “I saw myself in Gabrielle this evening, you know?”

“I’ve often seen you in her, Madame.”

“Really?”

“I dare say, you're very much alike.”

She looked defensive then. “And what would you know about that?”

“I suspect you've both suffered. Indeed I'll go further and say that I suspect it may be your own anxieties you are protecting Gabrielle from.”

The music stopped, leaving us suddenly beached in silence and staring at each other. We waited for it to begin again, but I think the music was waiting for us, respectful of the moment. It also told me *I was right*.

“Nonsense,” she said, but I could see the truth in her eyes. It was an old fear, an old pain.

“Madame? Please,... if you understood how much Gabrielle meant to me, you'd at least try to explain your reasons for being so set against us.”

She looked from side to side as if to escape – to escape me! But there was no escape, and suddenly she was in the mood for a confession, if only to prove to me how much she had suffered. And the confession she aimed at me full square, like the barrel of a gun, and she let fly without mercy: “I lost both my parents to the madness of the world, Monsieur. I was not born in France, you see? I am *Pied Noir*. Do you even know what that means? I dare say they don't teach such things in your English schools?”

“You're right of course, they don't teach much French colonial history. We British have enough coming to terms with the legacy of our own. But,... to be *pied noir*,... I think it means you are French-Algerian, Madame?”

It surprised her that I knew this, though why I knew it, I don't know. I'd read it somewhere, surfed into it serendipitously whilst researching other things, God knows when. She was talking about the Algerian war of independence in the late nineteen fifties. The period when Samantha's dress would have been in fashion. She would have been old enough to be a child, I guessed, and old enough to remember its worst inhumanities. So that was the source of her pain. And so long ago.

“My home was in Algiers,” she said. “But I left that city an orphan, fled it, escaped with only the clothes I stood up in. I was ten years old, my parents gunned down in the street in front of me. Yet who talks of Algeria now? Who cares? What? You nod,... how can you understand? You *English*,...”

“I'm not English, Madame. It's a mistake everyone makes. I am British. I was born in Ireland. I came to England as a child. And believe me I know what it is to escape a city on fire. I've seen pavements slick with blood and worse after a bombing. We might swap notes on violent unrest, and I'm truly sorry about your parents, but I need no lecture on the horrors of it. Algiers in the fifties. Belfast in the Seventies,... It seems we have much in common, Madame.”

It was our connection, our point of contact. Finally the enigma of Madame Lafayette dissolved and she became knowable. I felt everything I had been trying to forget and forgive from those lost days rush at once into conscious memory, and then, miraculously, evaporate. And what did I do? I felt my eyes filling up like a girl, and I had to turn away before they spilled over. My god! She'd lived through that? I dragged my sleeve across my eyes before facing her again.

“Madame, if you'll forgive me, there is no sense in protecting Gabrielle from the things you have suffered yourself.”

I don't know how much of this she registered, how much of an impression I'd made, but she was looking at me strangely. I'd surprised her I think, and that had to be good, because I doubted many had ever broken through her stony exterior. We should have embraced. I wanted to,... God help me. Her eyes had seen the same horrors as

mine,... and worse,...

“Madame,... your parents,... Gabrielle didn't tell me.”

“She does not know, and,... I wish I had not told you. I rarely speak of it. I *never* speak of it.”

“But has Gabrielle never been curious? I mean her own Grandparents?”

“She knows they died in Algiers. Not how, nor my being witness to it.”

I took her hands impulsively. I think she flinched, trying to withdraw, but I wouldn't let her. And my eyes were filling again. “Madame. I'm truly sorry. I,... I won't say anything to Gabrielle,... but please,.... you must tell her yourself.”

My tears did not impress her – quite the opposite in fact; this woman was made of iron, and any man who was not was beneath contempt. It was hardly an endearing quality, but at least I respected it now.

“My husband speaks well of you,” she said, by way of diversion. “So does Gruber, who for all of my dislike, is none-the-less a reputable man. And it seems you also have a powerful ally in Mademoiselle Lewis this evening. These are impressive sponsors, Monsieur.”

“Thank you, Madame. I don't know what I've done to deserve them.” For a moment I thought she was about to relent and to trust me with the protection of her daughter. The sudden tingling in my breast told me it was also as important to win her trust, as it was to win Gabrielle's.

“But they are not enough to persuade me,” she went on. I felt myself deflated at once. “I shall make you a prediction, Mr. Graves,” she said. “Gabrielle will be leaving with us in the morning. And you will stay away from her in future.”

“Ah,...” She wasn't going to make this easy for me. “Then if I may also be allowed to make a prediction, Madame?”

“If you dare.”

I wiped the last of the tears from my eyes. “You and Monsieur

Lafayette will return to Paris, tomorrow, but Gabrielle will stay here. And on Saturday, we shall travel to Ibiza, together. There we will remain for as long as it pleases her."

She allowed me a smile, but it was not the smile of one acknowledging defeat, more one who thought she knew something I didn't. "It's impossible, Mr. Graves," she said, then looked more closely at me, scrutinising me, searching for weakness, for cowardice. She might have found it once and exploited it, and I think it confused her now that for all of my weeping, she could gain no purchase.

"I told you," she went on, though not as confidently as before. "My daughter is unwell. You fool yourself if you think otherwise. She is at liberty, but only in my care. Where I go, she must go also. Be very careful then, if you think to deceive us and run off together."

"Madame, your daughter is perfectly well."

"That is what you think, but I have medical certificates that say otherwise. And if she leaves with you, I shall have no choice but to accuse you of kidnap and the possible seduction of a mental incompetent."

Ah,... that old thing! No. I wasn't running from that again. Even if it was true this time.

"This is ridiculous, Madame,..." I bit my tongue, and took a deep breath. "But of course you must do what you think is necessary. However, I ask you to consider that any attempt to come between me and Gabrielle I will view as malicious. I'm ready to challenge you and fight this through the courts if need be, though actually I suspect you're bluffing. I have it on good authority that Gabrielle was declared mentally competent a long time ago, and then after only a brief spell of therapy following a single, traumatic episode,.... one that I'm perfectly well aware of. You'd most likely find yourself in trouble for wasting police time."

She was wrong-footed, but still would not relent. "You say that now, but things will look very different from the back of a police car, Mr. Graves."

"No doubt they will, Madame. But you must not underestimate my resolve. Gabrielle is my life, she is my story, and we can have our

denouement this evening, or in the coming years after a gruelling legal process. I'm sure we both agree the latter would be a very tedious thing to expect my readers to endure, and quite unnecessary. I'm not concerned about the scandal this would cause. But what about you? Have you paused to consider for a moment what it would mean if things did not go your way? What if people looked at Gabrielle, as I look at her, and decide it is you who are misguided. So please, let us avoid all of that. Let us work together. Release Gabrielle into my care. Trust me, Madame."

She thought about it, but not for long. "It's out of the question."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. For a moment I felt we were almost within grasp of an understanding, you and I."

"I doubt that, Mr Graves. I'm perfectly aware of the troubles in Belfast. If you lived through those then we do indeed have something in common but, if you'll forgive me, you have the look of a man who is unable to connect with any woman unless he can also imagine making love to her, and that, quite clearly, is out of the question in my case."

I tipped my head back and laughed. "There may be some truth in what you say."

She wasn't smiling. "I meant it as an insult."

"I know you did, but then I've always taken myself so seriously. It takes the occasional slap in the face, metaphorical, or literal, to bring me back down to earth." I sighed, bowed faintly, respectful of the resolve of my nemesis. Except I was warming to her, capable I think of understanding her, of even loving her, though it would be a one-way thing for many years, I'm sure. I had the measure of her though, and I knew she was beaten.

"If I may say Madame, you dance very well."

"As do you, Mr. Graves," she admitted, grudgingly – though neither of us were talking about the dancing. "Better than I thought, at least."

Gabrielle had appeared on the edge of the lawn by now, her arm linked with Gruber's. He stood tall beside her, impressive, benign, protective. They'd come out for a closer look, and to see what was detaining us. Gabrielle had a calm confidence in her gaze as she

watched me. I think her mother saw the change in her and it gave her pause. It mattered nothing what had passed between me and Madame Lafayette, that gaze seemed to say; it would be what Gabrielle decided now that determined everyone's futures. I could only hope she still chose me,... chose to be with me. As we came up to them, Gabrielle swapped Gruber's arm for mine, but before she could say anything, her mother spoke.

“I think we will go up now, Gabrielle,” she said. There was something speculative in it though, as if testing to see if this were really her daughter. But in the space of an evening Gabrielle had aged weeks, explored extraordinary avenues of being, and there could be no going back to the old ways. Once a secret is revealed, it cannot be untold.

“As you wish, Maman,” she said, pleasantly. “You have a long journey tomorrow. But since I am not leaving in the morning, I shall stay up a little longer, I think. I would like to dance, with Richard.”

“We'll be settling the account,” said Madame. “There will be no room here for you after this evening. You have no money of your own, and for all of your apparent friendship with Herr Gruber here, he is not running a charity, so how are you to pay your way?”

Gabrielle sighed, as if it were obvious. “I shall stay with Richard, Maman, if he will have me.” And then to me: “*Tu veut danser, Richard*?”

“Of course, Gabrielle. I would like that very much.”

He mother tried again: “Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle held out her left hand, palm flat as if to repel her mother's dogged lunges. “No, Maman,” she said, then focussed on the twinkle of the amethyst. “I am with Richard now.” She smiled at the memory of something. “He means to rescue me,.... and I mean to let him. You must accept this, and not just for my own sake,... but also for your own.”

Her mother flinched. It was a direct hit. Sometimes we reject those things we know, deep down, are the best for us. “She will ruin you, Monsieur,” she warned me.

“No, Madame. You may try to ruin me, but it's useless. Please, in

protecting your daughter this way, you can only lose her. In letting her go, trust me, you will find her again."

She retreated then, without further complaint, thinking perhaps to cut off any more argument, except still a part of me dared to sense the defeat in her. Well,... not defeat exactly – more of an awakening.

We watched her go - Gabrielle, Gruber and I. Gabrielle forced a smile, as if to feign brightness, but I felt the tremor in her as she squeezed my hands. "Well, Richard, at least we shall have tonight," she said. "How many times have we said that before? Or did I dream it?"

"But if tonight is all the time we have?" I replied.

"Then it is all the time we shall need," she returned.

"Nonsense," said Gruber. "You shall have all the time in the world." He turned to us. "Well done, both of you. You've negotiated a period of great change and found your balance in it. I pronounce you both transformed. Everyone has gained something from this, and lost nothing." He nodded in satisfaction. "There could have been no better outcome. Mr Graves, you have delivered your denouement with a slippery determination that truly impresses the gods."

"Impresses the gods? I doubt that."

"But do you not *love* Madame Lafayette?"

Gabrielle laughed, unable to believe her ears. "What? Herr Gruber,... please."

But Gruber was right. "Wait, Gabrielle. It's true. I do love her."

She looked lost. "How can you? How can you, when you know how much I hate her?"

"You don't hate her, Gabrielle. You reject her."

"Exactly," she said. "So, Herr Gruber, where is your balance? I reject them, so have we not lost each other?"

"It's not irrevocable, Mademoiselle. Mr. Graves was correct in saying that only if they can bring themselves to let you go have they any hope

of finding you again, and you them. And you shall, you *shall* find them again, but this time on your own terms."

"There is wisdom in what you say," she replied. "But can they do that? Can they let me go? Can Richard and I spend at least the rest of our time here in peace and dignity?"

Gruber nodded. "When you wake up tomorrow, you'll find them already gone. I shall order the taxi for them myself." He took her hands and pressed them. "Well done,... very well done,... both of you. What a remarkable story." He thought for a moment than patted my arm. "Call your story whatever you like, Mr Graves. It pleases me." He turned then, as if to go back inside.

"One moment, Herr Gruber. If I may?" I held out his watch to him.

He tried to look surprised, but I could tell he'd been expecting it. "Oh,... splendid. Thank you. Wherever did you find it?"

"Does it matter?"

He laughed softly: "Of course not. Only that you were able to recognise it for what it was." And then he said: "Are you sure you wouldn't like to hang onto it for a little longer?" There was something teasing in the curl of his lips, I thought.

"No As you said, things appear to be in balance. It would be unwise to linger. The daemons who haunt this story might interpret that as pressing for an advantage. It's time we parted company."

"Very wise," he said. So he took the watch, slipped it back into his waistcoat pocket, and fastened the chain. The world steadied itself, felt secure again, and I was reassured that when I fell asleep that night, hopefully in Gabrielle's embrace, I'd still still be in her embrace when I woke up.

"I'll be sorry to see you leave," he said. "You'll send me a copy of your story?"

"Of course, though in all likelihood it will never be published, you know? I mean not as a paper book,... most likely given away online under a pseudonym. But I'll send you the link."

He looked emotional for a moment, then forced a sigh, and a quick smile. “So long as others read of what what happened here, it doesn't matter.” And then: “I'll have Heinrich clean and polish your car for the journey, shall I?”

“Thank you. That's very kind.”

There was quite a crowd now, milling around the periphery of the garden, their faces illuminated by the coloured lights which cast dramatic shadows across their features. It made them appear unreal,... a little theatrical. No one was dancing and they'd grown quiet, an air of expectation in their soft murmurings. Then the music began, but still they lingered in the periphery of things, along the edges and in the half way places between darkness and light.

“Why don't they dance?” asked Gabrielle.

Samantha came then and took Gruber's arm. “They're waiting for you,” she said.

“For us? But why?”

“You have become a myth,” said Gruber.

Samantha gave us a tender smile and gestured with her eyes to the empty dance floor. “They wait to applaud you.”

Gabrielle drew me in the direction of the lawn.“Well, Richard,” she said. “Shall we?” As she drew me, my eye fastened upon the amethyst, and she laughed. “Don't worry,” she said. “I'll not hold you to it.”

“Hush,... don't spoil it. Surely, it means nothing if you don't hold me to it.”

She kissed me then and we began to dance. “Very well,” she said. “But who shall we break the news to first, do you think?”

Chapter 60

We fast forward now, and I'm on the terrace of La Casa, dancing as the sun fades to amber over a darkening azure sea. The sky is clear, the night is warm, and coloured lights are strung beneath the awnings, lending a holiday air. I'm wearing a white suit, Gabrielle a floaty white frock. She's looking tanned and lovely, her hair now flecked with gold gifted from this impossibly persistent Mediterranean sun.

“What are you thinking Richard?”

“What was it you once said to me about asking that question, Gabrielle?”

She laughs. “I don't know. What did I say?”

“You said: Don't ask me, *I mean don't ever ask me that,* unless you really want to know, but you should be warned, I am from a dark place.”

“Oh, but that was such a long time ago. So tell me. What are you thinking?”

“If you must know, I was thinking about butterflies.”

She laughs again: “Butterflies? Seriously?”

“To be more precise, I was thinking about the philosopher Chuang Tzu.”

She frowns beautifully, but a smile isn't far away, its presence betrayed by the dimples in her cheeks. “You sound just like my father with your philosophy.”

“I take that as a compliment.”

Things are better now with her parents. Indeed the fiercely disdainful Monsieur and Madame may even be on the verge of visiting our island abode, but on Gabrielle's terms,... and when Gabrielle is ready. I'm cautious, for Gabrielle's sake, but secretly looking forward to seeing

them again – her father for his philosophy, but also her mother. We are a generation apart, but have both witnessed things as children we did not understand, witnessed the worst of the world and there is a unique kind of camaraderie in that.

“So,” says Gabrielle, “This Chuang Tzu?”

“Chinese sage,” I tell tell her. “Fourth century BC. He wrote how he once dreamed he was a butterfly, and on waking didn't know if he was Chuang Tzu who'd dreamed he was a butterfly, or if he was still a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu.”

“And is that your way of saying you're not sure if you're dreaming this now, nor if memories of our summer at La Maison are of something real, or merely something you remember dreaming once?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Then you have a short memory.”

“Oh?”

“You've clearly forgotten the drive from La Maison to Barcelona in that little car of yours. My derrière still aches of it, and reminds me the journey was real enough.”

“I remember that. Also the two flat tyres and the blown head gasket. It's a miracle we ever made it at all.”

“But we made it.”

“Yes.”

“It was inevitable we would.”

“I wish I'd shared your confidence at the time.”

“No. The ending was never in any doubt. But you were wrong when you wrote – oh, how did you put it - *the story always ends with the shuddering out of a man's loins into the woman's silken vessel*?”

I give a mock cringe. “Did I really put it like that?”

“Yes you did. *Imbécile.*”

“So when does it end?”

“Later of course, after many such shudderings, when we look back at the journey one day and ask if it really meant anything.”

“And did it?”

“Of course. Are we not changed by it? Are we not happier than before?”

“Yes.”

“Then what else is there? I remember once sitting at a table with you and Gruber, and him opening a bottle of wine. I said that the cork was out for me now and the wine must be drunk to the bottom, or left to spoil.”

“I remember.”

“That was a very special wine, Richard. A very special bottle. I am still drinking it.”

“I know. My glass was brim-full, and I feel I've barely sipped at it yet,”

“Also we are not thrown about as much by our dreams any more.”

“But that's because you've always found a way of grounding me in whatever reality we find ourselves.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Then I accept it.”

But there's still a dreamlike quality to my life, even though, as Gabrielle says, things are steadier now. It's just a way of seeing, I suppose, of accepting that nothing is as it seems, that sometimes it's more, sometimes less, that we must rely upon our instinct, upon the relationships with our inner voices to tell the difference.

The greatest dream of all for us was of course that fateful summer we spent at La Maison. Our last days there are remembered now for a special quality, for a dreaminess, yes, but also a profound calm and a coherence to our thoughts. It allowed me to grasp a very simple truth from the apparent chaos of our adventures, that the essential thing we think we're missing in life, and spend our whole lives searching for, actually, we can never lose. We don't know it's there until we've thrown everything else away, or lost it to an apparent calamity. Then we see the world anew, and relive the miracle of it every day, for the rest of our lives. Sometimes for us to lose everything is the greatest blessing the gods can bestow.

I remember the shaded cool of our rooms as I finished up our story. I remember the paleness of the light as it fell across the white sheets of the bed, the chestnut brown of Gabrielle's hair spread upon the pillow and seeming to be the only thing of colour in a world that was fading back to consciousness. We were waking from the great dream and would shortly be returning to the world. And though I did not want to leave La Maison, I took comfort from the fact we would be waking together from now on, took comfort also from the fact we found ourselves united in a vision of things, both peculiar and uniquely liberating.

On the morning of our departure, Gruber and his staff lined up on the steps outside the hotel to take their leave of us. I remember the little curtsey and the mischievous twinkle from Bernadette, and I remember Gruber with his knowing smile, handing me the keys to my car which stood out on the gravel, shining like something old and tired returned to new. How long ago was that, I wonder? How many seasons past already?

The sun shone low through the trees as we left La Maison, a shimmering strobe, pulsing, whiting out and rendering vague the hinterland between what was palpably real, and what I could only imagine might lie ahead of us. I felt her hand settle in my lap, and then the sun became the dawn light, and her hand time-shifted into the hand she always rests upon me when we sleep these days.

A year. It's been a year now: two weeks as guests of La Casa, the rest as owners of the house I once dreamed of, overlooking the sea, the house with the white walls and the red geraniums.

“You see how they look at us, Richard?” she asks, as we dance.

“Not at us, Gabrielle,” I tell her. “It's you they're looking at.”

“Oh?”

“The women want to be you. The men want to be with you, in my place.”

“Are you saying no one notices you, Richard?”

“Yes. It's always been that way, I think. I didn't realise it before, but I do now, and I'm happy with it.”

“But these are your words. How can it be that no one notices you? They have only to read our story to know you.”

“But these are your words, Gabrielle. You gave them to me. I don't get to write a single one, unless you say so. All others know about me are the dull facts of my Wikipedia entry.”

“Then I must update your entry. Poor Richard. Poor, lonely writing man. At least *I* notice you.”

“Yes, you do. And so long as I can keep it that way, it's all I'm ever going need.”

She laughed. “If you want me to stay with you then you must promise me we shall never live an ordinary life.”

“I already did that once.”

“I remember.”

“How am I shaping up?”

She kisses me. “Oh,... you are a strange one, like me you know? A little bent out of shape, but I think I can do something with you.”

Bernadette moves among the diners on the terrace, her pad poised to take their orders, pen clicking at the ready. La Casa has become known for two things; for the slight young German girl who is licking it into shape on behalf of the mysterious Gruber, and also because it is the place where the reclusive English writer and the enigmatic Frenchwoman - his lover, his muse - come to dance.

Perhaps it's your table Bernadette approaches now. She recognises you at once by that far away look in your eyes. You are a pilgrim from an increasingly dystopic world, seeking your own story, your own myth and thinking to find something in us you imagine you cannot find in yourself. But trust me, it's there my friend. You need only dare to imagine, and your daemons will show you the way. Just take care you don't make demons out of them, or they'll ruin you.

I see you draw Bernadette a little closer now as you gesture in our direction. She nods. “Yes,” she says. “It's them.”

We are a cliché then, something spilling ready made from the soul of the world. We are a story it tells over and over, one it never tires of hearing recounted back through the lives of lovers, like us. Not all myths are perfect of course, and I hope you'll forgive this one its shortcomings. Likewise, not all the best myths end well, but I've found you stand a chance if first of all you can win the gods over to your side, then have the good sense to listen to their advice.

I hear you asking Bernadette about our story. You seek to separate fact from the fiction perhaps? But ours is a myth, remember, and there really is no difference, for in myths all things must be be read as true, if not always literally. That's the strangeness you feel in us. You crave it, I know you do, but you possess it too. It's just a different way of seeing, that's all. And we were taught by a master magician. We were the Last Guests, you see?

The Last Guests of La Maison Du Lac.

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